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Manto: Narrativizing Saadat Hasan Manto's Life and Times Through the Literary Biopic Genre

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Abstract: This paper probes into the genre of the highly acclaimed biographical film on the noted Urdu writer, Saadat Hasan Manto, directed by Nandita Das as *Manto* (2018). The matter of enquiry of this research paper involves an analysis of the genre and sub-genre of biopic and literary biopic respectively, to understand the postmodernist narrative method of interweaving fact and fiction in order to understand the author and his works through a mutual dialogue and dynamism. In the second part of the essay, there is an examination of the strategies through which the film overcomes the conventional portrayal of the writer-hero as an artistic genius in order to present the contradictoriness that is the cornerstone of Manto's fictional corpus. Finally, there is an attempt to understand the implications of a film such as this both in the immediate cinematic context of rising popularity of biopics fostering jingoistic nationalist sentiments, and the larger global context fuelled by increasing communal hatred, violence and curbs on freedom of speech and expression.

Keywords: Adaptation, biopic, biographical film, Partition, literary writing, literary biopic.

The literary adaptation of the life and works of Saadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955), the *enfant terrible* of Urdu literature, as *Manto* (2018), directed by Nandita Das converges various contexts that pertain to its form and poetics that have acquired urgency in the face of global debates on freedom of speech, role and responsibility of art, and the rise of communalism that translates into violence, homelessness and even exile. Manto as an author becomes a complex site of interrogation of these perennial questions which have only become more hard-pressed than ever



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before and therefore the ringing relevance of a film like *Manto* deserves to be analyzed both with respect to its film genre as a literary biopic and its narrative structure that hinges around the traumatic India-Pakistan Partition of 1947.

Manto is an author who is inspirational and controversial in equal parts. Though he has always been revered in literary circles for his Partition stories that constitute one of the most riveting chunks of Indian Literature syllabus in the academia, it is only through the popular media such as theatre, television, radio, internet and cinema that his works have received a wider circulation. Radio broadcasts of his stories by RJ Sayema on Radio Mirchi became hugely successful and in a strange manner have become a fitting tribute to the artist who once recorded over a hundred radio-dramas in All India Radio in Delhi during the 1940s. Pakistan has paid homage to Manto who migrated there after Partition through a sensitive biopic *Manto* (2015) that was later also produced as a television series. NanditaDas's *Manto* dispenses away with the cradle-to-grave linear narrative progression in order to focus on the four tumultuous years of his life spanning 1946 to 1950 across the cities of Bombay and Lahore that became parts of two separate nations in 1947. On numerous occasions, Das has elaborated on her narrative method as one that coalesces the author's life incidents with that of his stories, interweaving "Manto stories" and "stories by Manto" in a complex relationship bound by the experiences gleaned from the film industry, the by-lanes of Bombay, the well-heeled literary circuits, the disarray and shock of Partition and the subsequent failure of nation-state to provide sense of security, belonging and freedom to its citizens. In doing so, Das's film can be studied with reference to its status as a biopic, a genre that has established itself as one of the most marketable and preferred mode of storytelling in Bollywood, and the manner in which it frames the saga of the writer's personal, professional and social life imbuing it with a contemporariness that reverberates with the political urgencies of the present time. In what follows, there is an attempt to define *Manto* as a literary biopic that exceeds its generic limitations in its recourse to postmodernist narrative style in order to explore the questions about artistic freedom and responsibility, the meaning of literature and finally, the importance of a film such as this to enable constructive conversation between literature and popular culture, word and film and ultimately past and present.



I

Rachel Dwyer in her essay “The Biopic of the New Middle-Classes in Contemporary Hindi Cinema” points out that it is only in the early 2000s that the biopic as a genre was revived in mainstream Hindi cinema with films on national heroes and fighters such as *Ashoka* (2001), *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* (2002), and *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* (2005) paving the way for a second cycle of biopics, such as *Guru* (2007), *Chak De! India* (2007) and *Paan Singh Tomar* (2012), that were based on the new “heroes and heroines of an emergent social group—India’s new middle-classes” (68). However, beyond the cycles of biopics pointed out by Dwyer, Bollywood has been and continues to witness an upsurge in the number of biopics produced each year with almost guaranteed success-rate. In recent times, biopics have been made on actors and actresses (*Sanju* (2018), *Dirty Picture* (2011)), social idols (*Shahid* (2013), *Neerja* (2016), *Manjhi: The Mountain Man* (2015)) to the upcoming ones on political figures such as Bal Thackeray, Rani Lakshmi Bai and the former prime minister of India, Dr. Manmohan Singh. It is noticeable that amongst these sub-genres of biopics, it is the sports biopic that echoes the rising sentimentalism around nationalistic pride, often foregrounding aggressive masculinity, a moral opposition between good and evil, edification of the sports hero who through his individual achievement becomes the embodiment of virtue while his life-narration in mythic dimensions becomes an opportunity to deliver didacticisms to the larger public. This romanticized and melodramatic formula can be seen in varying degrees in films such as *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* (2013), *Dangal* (2016), *M.S. Dhoni: The Untold Story* (2016) and the recently released *Gold* (2018).

In this list of movies, *Manto* can be singled out (with the exception of Sohrab Modi’s *Mirza Ghalib* (1954), ironically written by Manto, and Guru Dutt’s *Pyasa* (1957)) as one of the most powerful portrayals of a literary artist and his works, a representation that has almost become a rarity in mainstream Bollywood. Its difference from its contemporaries lies primarily in the choice of subject who embodies within himself such complexities of personality, social compulsions and tribulations of a period in Indian history that is marked by great political, economic and cultural upheavals. As such, *Manto* carries the responsibility of not just an honest representation of a historical, literary personage but also being authentic to the conventions of the



filmic genre, i.e. the biopic. Dennis Bingham in his book *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?* argues that a “biopic is by no means a simple recounting of the facts of someone’s life. It is an attempt to discover biographical truth” (7). In its recreation of four years of Manto’s life and times, there is an attempt to grasp and project not just the ‘truth’ of the author’s biography or facts of his life’s events but also the filmmaker’s interpretation of them. Das’s extensive interviews with the author’s daughters in Pakistan and other members of the family, in her own words provided her with “small but unique nuggets about his personality” that lend realism to the film (Das “Manto Then, Manto Now”). A careful reader of the author’s works will discern that numerous details gleaned from essays written by the author’s friends such as Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi as well as lesser-known works such as “*Murli Ki Dhun*”, “*Muftnoshon Ki Kismein*” and his radio-drama “*Aao Kahani Likhen*” provide a rich intertext to Manto’s life-story. Manto, therefore, treads the ground between the truth of the biography and truth of the film’s author—innovating, experimenting and fictionalizing in the crevices of historical truth that nevertheless is an adaptation of numerous sources, both written and oral as pointed out. Commenting on fictionalized or interpretive biographies, Carolyn Anderson, therefore, argues, “fictionalization... seems to be a prerequisite of the genre” (331).

In the context of a highly textured nature of the filmic narrative, Das in her interview to *The Indian Express* explains that she did not “make this film in the hope of creating heroes” and since in “Manto’s own works, the line between fact and fiction is blurred”, she uses the same form “as it allows the audience to enter his state of mind, both as a person and a writer” (Sampada and Kameshwari n.p.). This seamless intertwining of accounts of, by and about the author is an important facet of postmodernist narrative technique that eschews traditional sequential historiography in favor of a layered storytelling weaving together fictional works by the author with his biography. Such literary biopics, in the words of Linda Hutcheon are specimens of “historiographic metafiction” that are “both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (5).

One can explore this deft intermingling of fact and fiction through several instances in the film. Manto opens with a recreation of his story “Ten Rupees” about a child prostitute and her innocent joy at the prospect of a car ride. A scene in Irani café follows this where Manto along with



other stalwarts of Urdu literature such as IsmatChughtai, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Krishan Chander and ShahidLateef seem to be discussing Manto's obsession with writing about prostitutes. This first section is closed by another prostitute story "The Hundred Candle Power Bulb". A pimp, played by PareshRawal, tries to strike a deal with the customer i.e. Manto. He then approaches the prostitute who is extremely sleep-deprived and fatigued. She refuses to oblige the client and when the pimp persists against her wishes, she is overcome by her immediate circumstances and in a dramatic turn of events, kills him. Manto's fiction, which has been synonymous with a portrayal of pimps and prostitutes for a long time, presents itself here in these two instances, juxtaposed with the writer's justification to write them.

His fierce defense draws from the rationale of lived experiences for it is only because he has, as he says, observed them so minutely from his Faras Road apartment that he feels compelled to narrate their lives. Manto's walks through the lanes and *chawls* of colonial Bombay and his access to gossip and rumors of the film industry, makes him more than a detached *flaneur* of the city. He becomes a deeply invested chronicler who is both a narrator as well as the narrator-protagonist of these tales mingling his own experiences with that of his characters. A brilliant example from *Manto* is the scene where Rishi Kapoor as the sleazy Parsi film producer, ArdeshirIrani of Imperial Film Studio not only forces the potential actresses of his films to strip but is also reluctant to pay Manto—the film writer his dues. Drawing from his famous story, "My Name is Radha", the film transposes the fictional narrative of HurmuzjiFramji, Radha and Niaz Mohammad onto the conversation between Irani and Manto himself, the former being a plausible inspiration for Framji's character in the original story.

II

If Manto experiments with the conventions of a fictionalized biography on one hand, it also makes a worthy attempt to dislodge the parameters of a conventional writer-biopic so often celebrated in the West but relatively unexplored in Indian mainstream cinema. Most film theorists agree upon the recourse to the trope of "artistic genius" in literary biopics. Indrusiak and Ramgrabargue, "most literary biopics blatantly reinforce romantic genius" (98). Belen Vidal points out that "central to cinema's incursions into the lives of artists is the mystery of artistic genius"



(70). *Manto* as a film carefully and self-consciously imagines Manto as a supremely outspoken and master writer but one who nevertheless, often succumbs to his own insecurities, petty egotism and a careless abandon that often creeps into his otherwise doting and loving domestic persona. In *Manto*, the audience gets an opportunity to witness Manto amidst the banal and the extraordinary, at his creative and argumentative best and into the deepest recesses of his mind's darkness that often gloomed him in difficult phases of financial stringency, inchoate thought patterns and inability to express them on paper and ultimately his increasing disorientation in the newly-formed Islamic nation of Pakistan.

There are several striking scenes in the movie that paint numerous hues of Manto's persona imbuing the narrative with a delicate richness rather than a crude exaltation of his genius. In two memorable vignettes between Manto and Safiya, he is shown as man of incredible sense of humor who treats his wife as a companion, the first person to read his stories and the one who also in her own silent resilience becomes the moral center of his often callous ways. In a visual adaptation of his story "Hamid Aur Hamida", both Safiya and Manto jointly concoct the story while sitting in the park presenting to the audience a rare moment of laughter and affection that not only characterizes their marital relationship but also Manto's liveliness, recounted fondly by his friends and evident in his much less discussed early romantic stories and some of his radio-dramas. In another instance, Manto is shown as a caring husband and a doting father equally at ease while ironing his wife's clothes and narrating a story about two sisters Naani and Nahaani (a small portion of his radio-drama, "*Aao Kahani Likhen*") with his two daughters innocently perched upon his lap.

However, at the other side of this jovial man is another Manto—one who has not been able to outgrow the pain of his growing years in Amritsar, deprived of love and affection of his father and often pitted against his successful lawyer stepbrothers. In a scene filmed at a graveyard, Manto is shown as offering the holy *namaz* or prayer only at his mother's grave. In yet another understated scene, Manto rebukes looking at his father's portrait hung on the wall. The graveyard scene draws details from his famous essay "*Taraqqi Yaftan Qabrastan*" or "Our Progressive Graveyards" written shortly after the death of his mother. The scene also alludes to the memory of Arif, his first-born son, who succumbed to pneumonia shortly after his birth in Delhi. The death of his son was to have



a lifelong impact on Manto who never talked about the tragedy but wrote a short story titled “Hamid’s Son” at a later part of his life. These scenes help to account for the bitterness that often characterizes his later short stories and sometimes even his irritability with the pretensions of middle-class moral dictums. Even in his essay on his doppelganger titled “My Twin”, he claims that “Manto’s writing is a consequence of the mutual contradiction between the two aspects of his life” i.e. an extremely stern father and a tender, loving mother (2).

Since Manto swivels across the event of Partition, it is here that the film most sharply presents us with the deep sense of insecurity and acute sensitivity to the growing violence and communalism around him. While the first half of the movie introduces the audience to Manto as a part of the urbane, cosmopolitan elite of Bombay film industry comprising mavericks such as Ashok Kumar, K.Asif, Himanshu Rai, Jaddanbai and Nargis, it is only the stark moment at which Shyam Chadda, his dearest friend, confesses in a moment of anger that he could kill even him for being a Muslim. Perhaps, it was Manto’s foresight and dispassionate assessment of the gravity of communal hatred that had spread its tentacles deep into the very stratum of society that he could not extract himself out of the well of self-doubt and cynicism hereafter. Thus, while on one hand was his deep-seated fear of being subjected to violence for being a Muslim and would hence travel with both Hindu and Muslim caps, on the other hand, he could boldly proclaim— “*jab mazhabdil se nikalkarsar par charhjaye, toh topiyanpehennipadti hain*” i.e. when religion ceases to be in the hearts of men then one is left with nothing but to wear different hats.

Finally, as the movie inches towards a close, there is also a detached look at the willful, self-abnegation that Manto increasingly drowns himself into. Slapped with obscenity cases all through his life, ones on “*Upar, Neeche Aur Darmiyan*” and “*ThandaGosht*”, the latter’s trial being explored in the movie, test his resilience beyond limits. His increasing dependence on alcohol, insurmountable financial debts and bouts of delusion and nostalgia for the city that held within itself all that he loved, makes him almost a tragic figure that is unable to cope with these personal hardships. The single-handed responsibility of raising his three daughters in the face of unsteady income compounded by unrestrained alcoholism is a matter of great trauma to Safiya. She is empathetic to her husband but nevertheless stands at the receiving end of his rash temper and



believes that it is solely his writing that is responsible for the deplorable state of the family. *Manto* does not attempt to sanitize these pitfalls in Manto's character, though it does provide a contextual framework in which the audience feels compelled to empathize rather than cast a moral aspersion on him. The larger impact of Partition and its aftermath are seen as sociological reasons that affect the individual at his personal, political, social and mental level. The genius artist who can get under the skin of sexually-abused Sakina in "*Khol Do*" or the tormented and shocked Ishar Singh of "*ThandaGosht*", himself becomes the mentally-displaced, disoriented Bishan Singh of "*Toba Tek Singh*", unable to belong to any city or country, left in a no-man's land to hunt for words that elude him, a writer's block that leaves him with an angry gibberish in the end—"Upar di gud-gud di, of theannexe dimoong di dal, of the Pakistan, and Hindustan, and Manto".

Indrusiak and Ramgrab argue that it is the artistic genius that differentiates literary luminaries from the common man and in films about them, "true literary artists may go through dry spells, writers' blocks...depression, bipolar disease, editorial failure, anxiety of influence" but they somehow "persevere and eventually purge all these traumas...through an outpouring of their soul...onto pages" (100). The enumeration of writers' challenges here seem to exactly mirror Manto's grim circumstances but it is precisely through their mature handling that the film dispenses away with the myth of the extraordinary genius of an artist in order to present a more nuanced and well-rounded image of the author as a citizen, father, husband, son, friend, writer and even an offender in the eyes of the court. It is this ability to portray the protagonist as fierce, outspoken and unsparing as Manto without heroizing or pedestalizing him that makes *Manto* a worthy literary biopic to have emerged out of Bollywood.

III

While it has become clear how Manto fulfills the conditions of a mature fictionalized literary biopic, it brings one to the implications of the circulation of a film such as this in the contemporary time. As a literary biopic, *Manto* has enabled a larger knowledge dissemination about an artistic voice that was as powerful in his times as it is the contemporary global context of policing and trolling of speech and expression, the activation of state machinery against critical discourses aggressively libeled as "sedition" and the growing communal and religious hatred across



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nations, communities and races. While *Manto* is certainly not the only attempt to adapt the author's work and his life, with numerous praiseworthy stage adaptations such as Ashwath Bhatt's "*Ek Mulaqat Manto Se*" or Rukhsana Ahmad's "*Kali Salwar*", it is definitely a worthy step in the league of Sarmad Sultan Khoosat's *Manto* to rescue the author from a peripheral position limited to academia or those deriving morbid pleasure out of the supposed obscenity of his stories. *Manto* does this most powerfully through its depiction of the writer's view of art and literature and his ironic marginality along various circles that he was a part of—whether literature, cinema or radio.

The scene in Irani café that has been alluded to before, *Manto* is "advised" by Shahid Lateef, Ismat Chughtai's husband, to focus his writerly attention to the struggles of mill workers and the exploitation by the British rather than irrelevant stories about prostitutes, pimps, and other castaways of the society. Someone also advises him to formally become a part of the Progressive Writers' Association, the most sought-after group of artists, writers and intellectuals that made the goal of their literature social upliftment of all sections of the society. Chughtai, who equally shared *Manto*'s trials over obscenity and outspokenness, questions whether a writer ought to be called one only if he becomes a part of a self-appointed association. Similarly, Faiz Ahmad Faiz (played by Javed Akhtar) although defends *Manto* on charges of obscenity in *Thanda Gosht*, but publicly demeans his writing as not fulfilling the highest standards of what could be labeled as "literature". *Manto*'s advocacy of certain words deemed as "crude" and "unparliamentary" as a necessary part of realist fiction is an attempt to make the everyday and the banal as relevant matter of literature. The same can be claimed about his choice of characters and milieus which reflect his belief that literary writing must evolve with the changing times and circumstances. Snippets from his speech at Jogeshwari College titled later as "*Tehreeri Bayan*" find their way in *Manto* making a case for the perennial question of what constitutes literature, obscenity, and responsibility of the author. *Manto* was castigated by none other than Sajjad Zaheer, one of the founding fathers of the Progressive Writers' Association, for revolting against the "cultural disciple" in his book *The Light* (253). Through *Manto*'s marginal status, there is an attempt to renegotiate the terms of literariness that seems to be contingent upon very notions of conformity and adherence that the custodians of art set to debunk in the first place.



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Manto vociferously claims that in the trying circumstances of the Partition aftermath, everybody engages in a futile blame game looking back at the past, overlooking the much more dangerous murderers of the present age who continue to write history with blood and arms. Raising his voice against Hindu-Muslim violence, he proclaims that he is an artist foremost, who cannot tolerate petty wounds and pointless bruises in the name of religion. In his insistence to portray things “as they are” and not as they “should be” or “could be”, Manto bares the pessimistic reality of the world around him in its stark nihilism rather than conforming to the presentation of “silver lining” in every banal situation as his socialist realist contemporaries would be inclined to.

Manto is, however, not shorn off any redeeming qualities or tinge of hope. Just as in his stories that may not conform to the dictums of “standard literature”, there are remarkable instances of humanity, empathy and innocence amidst the sordid realities of life, *Manto*’s “conclusion” is framed by Faiz Ahmed Faiz’s anthem on freedom of speech and expression—“*Bol Ke Lab Azad Hain Tere*” (“Speak! That Your Lips are Free”), gently underlying, what Das has emphasized as the spirit of Manto or what he stands for. This “*Mantoiyat*” or “Mantoness” as she describes it is the desire to be “outspoken, free-spirited and courageous” (qtd. in Dutta n.p.). Furthermore, an independent rap-song titled “*Mantoiyat*” sung by Raftaar and Nawazuddin Siddiqui as part of the *Manto* project fulfills the goal of a literary biopic working as, in Hutcheon’s words, “a formal manifestation of both a desire to close the gap between past and present of the reader and a desire to rewrite the past in a new context” (118).

Finally, as part of the current trend of biopic genre in Bollywood, *Manto* shines as an example of responsible film-making, one that registers its affiliation to the author embedded in historical, cultural, political and literary contexts not merely in terms of factual accuracy but also to the symbolic relevance of his conviction and the brave discourses he engendered. In doing so, *Manto* throws into question several neat binary oppositions between different religions, nations, right and wrong, literature and obscenity and truth and falsity. The film, as a vivid intertextual mosaic of the author’s memories of a sepia-tinted colonial Bombay with renowned members of the film industry, his dismissal of artifices of any kind as “fraud” and his endearing love for his friend Shyam expressed in their coinage “Hiptulla!” not only creates an ambience of an era bygone, but



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also help to concomitantly understand a man as contradictory as Manto overcome by addiction and inability to write, growing cynical over the years, disillusioned, displaced, offering us, what Edgar Allan Poe expresses as “ a peep behind the scenes, at the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought [...] - at the innumerable glimpses of idea that arrived not at the maturity of full view” but at moments of incomprehension, futility and despair (“The Philosophy of Composition” 676).

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