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An Illegitimate and Slangy attempt to call ‘Manto’ the Herald of Obscenity: A Critical Study of Manto’s *Thanda Ghosth (Cold Meat)*

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Abstract: Reviewing or upholding obscenities invariably sounds or stinks unpleasant, but we get attached to the obscene anecdotes, at some point in our life. In one way or the other, we are responsible for protecting or preserving some good old literature ‘what people call obscene’ for our future breeds to let them know what was the madness of partition, absolutism and the widespread impact of *Thanda Ghosth (Cold Meat)*. The mayhem, which emerged during the partition between India and Pakistan, gave birth to a new nation, rebellions and influential writers like Sadat Hasan Manto. The sole intention of this study is to analyze how Manto took a sabotaging mindset towards the evils of absolutism and mass exodus during segregation and fought repeatedly to preserve his literary approach in *Thanda Ghosth*. The research findings conclude that Manto succeeded very well in ridiculing the partition and the widespread obscenities, and was successful in defending his short story *Thanda Ghosth*. He was never the advocate of obscenity, but the source that made it possible for people to know the harsh realities of 1947. Furthermore, the paper upholds Manto’s *Thanda Ghosth* from those who professed that it contains alluring sexual facets and should never be called literature.

Keywords: Mantonian Literature, Madness of Partition, 1947, *Thanda Ghosth*, Chaos, Satire.

Introduction

Sadat Hasan Manto was born on 11 May 1912, in Samrala, Punjab, and then British India. His arrival led to the conclusion of well-established global powers. Most of the writers in the age of Manto revolutionized the entire scenario, but Manto declared that he was not among them — he was certainly in advance of them and tried to explore different subjects containing brutal truths and prevailing elements. Manto proved that he had rare insight into writing and how to make a difference with his rebellious ink



and impressions everywhere in the world. Undoubtedly, his pen was a flame, and he nurtured events without a slight touch of fear. Whenever a reader gets into the emotional layers of his stories and letters, the outcome comes in the form of an unending streak of tears and a higher amount of pity and anger.

Apartheid, repression, and deprivation disheartened Manto's existence. The thoughts inside his strengthened sensual mind rose like the stifling lava inside the volcano. Moreover, Manto suffered a great deal within and around the peripheries of his undisputed realm of writing. "Struggling with court cases against obscenity was also costing him emotionally and economically." (Das, p. 73)

There is no suspicion about Manto's ideologies and perspectives because he always hated suppression and preferred freedom to servitude and slavery of the British regime.

Manto categorically rejected the Gandhian pedagogy of reaching freedom through 'Ahimsa' only. He wrote satirical anecdotes unflinchingly about the British regime and the hypocrisy of his people as well as nation leaders. Manto's metaphysical aspects led him to explore and observe more and more during the separation of India and Pakistan. He has written a great deal about the violence against the children and women, even as for corpses. The emotional and depressed state prompted him to write the widely read short stories, for which he was tried many a time. The anecdotes he wrote continue to provide the reader with a sense of history. "Manto was a writing-machine. The writer exists only at the table where he writes. The table is Manto's real court of law, his confession box, his bed of nightmarish lovemaking, where he dissects a world that has lost its mind. It is also a world where the mad alone, like Toba Tek Singh retains the sensibility to realize the madness of partition." (Firak, "Manto, the writer, was not a man", np)

The table was Manto's frequently visited rendezvous, and it transformed Manto into a rebellious writer. Although, he was an alcoholic — despite that Manto is indeed our contemporary writer, who with his writing has disconcerted all other writers of his age. It was difficult for him to write due to the separation and migration, but he had strong insight into what was ahead of him. Manto was well aware of the underdeveloped artilleries and guided projectiles and how these can trigger the situation extensively. He knew how these can turn the good into worse. We have plenty of books and manuscripts about Manto's journey as a writer and how he was defined inaccurately. He talked about wars, wreckage, contagious pandering, and filth within the minds of absolutists. He never babbled sizably, but whatever he composed



was enough to trigger our volatile state. Likewise, he made his words intense sufficiently to pierce through our hearts. During the partition — the unexpected reshuffling transpired and brought glaring changes among the nations. Manto too suffered the suffocation, and he was never willing to leave Mumbai. The uncertainty, belief, and fear of alienation and massacring occurred as soon as the sounds of freedom blared through the narrow lanes of India. Manto was worried about his assassination and he too, left the country forthwith.

Manto was not one to cringe from casting away the veil hiding the ugly, inhumane realities lurking within the society, and he touched upon subjects that were considered taboo by society at large. This earned him great animosity within Pakistan, and even amongst literary circles. Yet, it did not deter him and he continued to ‘call it as he saw it’ in his writing. (Najmus-Sehr, p. 3)

Study of *Thanda Ghosth*

Thanda Ghosth was first published in a literary magazine called Javed in March, 1950 in Pakistan. The Magazine was banned by the government of Pakistan immediately, but after the acquittal, the story was later published by Sang-e-Meel publications.

Thanda Ghosth demonstrates the obnoxious elements within the societies at that time. The aftermath of the partition witnessed miscellaneous events like power, control, loss of life and property, and loss of identification and the damage is so deep that we are, still struggling with its reverberations and echoes around. The preeminence was nasty enough to restrain the subordinates from leaving the country. It was the time when people within the walls of India looted those, whom they felt were a stigma to the nation and same with the case of Pakistan. Manto explained the entirety of the arenas through his amazing utterances. *Thanda Ghosth* lets us know the misuse of sovereignty through the impotent, yet athletic character Isher Singh who satisfies his wife Kulwant Kaur with the material possessions he looted from the impoverished and desperate people. The story exclusively comments on the magnitude of violence of rape, by forcing the abuser to rape a woman who was already dead. The perpetrator, Isher Singh in the story is concocted to have not only sustained the corporal pain when he was brutally attacked by his wife, Kulwant Kaur, but also the psychological concussion of striving to rape a defunct body.

Manto highlighted the lethal machismo through the insignificant individuality of Isher Singh.



Manto symbolically attempted to illustrate the psyche of the rape victim, by making Isher Singh encounter a physical, psychological, emotional and sexual shock. Manto made Isher Singh realize, during the death scene, if he was the cold dormant piece of meat analogous to the corpse he attempted to rape before confronting his wife. “The rape of a corpse is symbolic of the blindness of exertion of power and control, not only over women but also over members of other communities.” (Mishra, “Manto and his revolutionary writings”, np)

The words of Manto are evident that the era had undergone a painful destruction, and it presumably gave rise to communal conflicts. There are themes of pure violence due to the bloodbaths as Isher was the assassin who killed more than six people and was, at length, killed by his wife, Kulwant Kaur as she suspected him of having external love affairs. In *Thanda Ghosth* there is directness and factual rationales of how one becomes the victim and the other oppressor. Through the savage Isher Singh, Manto exposed some glimpses of humility and guilt towards the end when Isher Singh, amid grief and discomfort, revealed what the lifeless corpse looked like. He uttered the words ‘Cold Flesh’; it shows Isher Singh’s tenderness out of savagery. “Manto’s *Thanda Ghosth* drew attention to the collapsing sexual ethic of communal times, by producing the confessional story of a haunted man who accidentally indulged in necrophilia.” (Firak, “Manto, the writer, was not a man”, np)

While writing, *Thanda Ghosth*, Manto spreads out the oppressive actualities after the proclamation of freedom and the formation of a contemporary nation called Pakistan. Although, his monetary and romantic state derailed due to the tribunal prosecutions and allegations over the indecency used in *Thanda Ghosth*. Manto was chastely and highly supported by his wife Safia — soon after he migrated from Mumbai to newly formed Pakistan.

To all the feuds and allegations about his true societal vulgarism, Manto’s answer was straightforward: “If you can’t bear these stories then the society is unbearable. Who am I to remove the clothes of this society, which itself is naked? I don’t even try to cover it, because it is not my job, that’s the job of dressmakers.”

“Whether he was writing about prostitutes, pimps or criminals, Manto wanted to impress upon his readers that these disreputable people were also humans, much more than those who cloaked their failings



in a thick veil of hypocrisy. Irony and paradox were two formidable elements in his repertoire of literary devices that enabled him and his readers to see through the veil.” (Jalal, p. 26-27)

Manto and Literature

As argued prematurely, Manto was charged with obscenity six times; thrice before 1947 in British India, and thrice after independence in 1947 in Pakistan. In a court hearing, Manto was found guilty of circulating an obscene piece of writing and the court sentenced him to three months of relentless imprisonment and a fine of rupees 300, under section 292 of the Indian Penal Code and the Pakistan Penal Code in Pakistan’s early years. Manto’s literary realm seemed to be highly conflicting with other prominent writers of that time. He observed elements in a simple, yet sophisticated way. He pushed 1950s literature to the new domain where it was hard for anyone to come out without ‘psychalgia’. “When it comes to providing a fascinating commentary on the abusive or insensitive application of power and its discontents, Manto is quite similar to other illustrious writers, including literary giants such as Dickens, Kafka, Orwell and Coetzee. They too experienced such application of authority in diverse personal ways and subsequently adopted a vantage point from where they could examine the phenomenon from both within and without.” (Siddique, p. 1)

Sadat Hasan Manto, if you examine him, he is indelible. If you do not read him, then you will never be able to know the insanity of partition. Through his tiny, yet effective tales — he represented the dark side of the society and the people who had turned mad and wild. If everything was halved, then why didn’t the Sikh wackos in newly forged Pakistan be swapped for the crazy Muslim men in the madhouses of India? Furthermore, Toba Tek Singh was not insane, this world was, certainly. After countless litigations, penalties, and indictments, Manto felt exasperated and found it hard to jot down the cruel facets of society. He was further disheartened when Faiz Ahmad Faiz termed his *Thanda Ghosth* improper for good literature. Manto was anguished to hear a man of Faiz’s prominence, terminate the literary riches of his writing.

“If you were writing today, and especially if you were writing in English, you could go to all literary festivals and drink all the free booze you wanted. But they probably wouldn’t invite you because before and after drinking their booze you’d rant against the festival organizers, and you’d raise questions



about the sponsors' parentage. Just like you maligned us, judges. Having made your acquaintance while you were in the dock, and having familiarized ourselves with the filthy bits in your writings in the privacy of our chambers, we just wish to elaborate on the verdicts we handed down in those trials. No, this is not an apology on behalf of the Islamic Republic's judiciary, just some observations, clarifications — and we are sure you still hate it — some literary advice. Times have changed. If you were writing today we'd probably ignore your little blasphemies against the good taste and national interest and would just book you for that half pint in your pocket. But since you are sipping some superior stuff in heaven, can we ask what this obsession was with human anatomy and edible birds?" (Hanif, "Our case against Manto", np)

"Manto is as skilled as the best short story writers of the Russian and Western tradition and it is very sad that he has been erased from the literary canon." (Manzoor, "Sadat Hasan Manto: He anticipated where Pakistan would go", np)

Sadat Hasan Manto wrote his own epitaph six months before he died, which reads: "Here lies buried Sadat Hasan Manto in whose bosom is enshrined all the enigmas and artistic creation of short story writing. Consigned to the grave, under heaps of solid ground, even now he is speculating whether he is a great short story writer or God."

Manto's short stories were not given literary distinction before and after the independence because his stories mainly talked about the realities and rampant profanity. He through his celestial literary expressions exposed the prevalent issues and madness of the societies. Moreover, he wrote broadly about prostitution and the grounds for its eruption. Manto eventually buried his literary secrets and the mysterious existence of his thought process with him, eventually. He left an enormous number of ammunition and atomic bombs 'writings' for us to remember him as one the destructive go-betweens of truth and tangibility.

Salman Rushdie, the author of *Midnight's Children* and one of Manto's biggest advocates, describes him as 'Unparalleled in his generation'. "There are few writers," says "Who straddle both India and Pakistan as he does, and who engage with the deepest problems of both countries." (Walsh, "Manto: the writer who felt the pain of India's partition", np)

Manto never betrayed the genuine essence of literature because he spoke truth through his ink.



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Literature must be written or expressed in the form of purity and righteousness, and Manto was quite successful in achieving the victory by producing some anti-lyrical tremors. “Manto unmasks hypocrisy, and he doesn’t deceive with his words. Speaks truth and is fearless to encounter it. He will remain relevant as long as there is hypocrisy in the world. The day he ceases to be relevant, I will say we have learnt our lesson.” (Bhatt, “Manto need intelligent sensitive reader”, np)

Manto’s literary career was ruined by the editors of the publishing industry. They went awry to amass the essence of his metaphysical discernment. The blame is altogether on editors who put together some of his short stories and unabashedly considered them obscene without even doing sincere analysis. Mantonian literature talked about tolerance, women, and disempowered folks who are not even termed as human beings. Thus, in his literary and prognostic domain, one needs to be very sensitive and realistic in interpreting his unconquered literature. There is no doubt that his works are crammed with obscenities and vulgarity but at the same time, he proved that these infectious things (obsценities and vulgarity) pre-existed, and are powerful enough to disrupt the conscientious dogmas of a nation.

After Manto’s death, Ismat Chughtai, who was immensely close to Manto, wrote a letter to the people of Pakistan she emphasized the crisis that most writers of the twentieth century had encountered at one point or another. She questioned the government’s outcome to honour the writer whom they had brutally tortured and stamped with sedition and charges of obscenity when he was living. In that letter, she said, “And remember, gentleman, what I tell you: even after twenty years, Manto would still strike his head against the bars of a prison, as he in fact did, and people would still have death anniversary celebrations for him after he dies, as you in fact are. But during his lifetime, people would still kick him down. Look carefully to see if there is any Manto among you. Is there anyone among you who talks nonsense, who is extremely sensitive, who makes lots of silly mistakes and blunders, and who says things that no one understands? Is there anyone among you who thinks that no one understands him, who goes on showing his obstinacy, who sticks like a thistle on the hem of every passerby until he becomes unbearable? Is there anyone among you who thinks he is a great writer, but nobody is willing to admit it, a pauper or beggar who asks for money, properly and improperly, someone people try to avoid because he is alone? Beware of such a fraud, for if he dies tomorrow, you might have to bow your heads before him. You might



be compelled to write articles; you might be compelled to hold gatherings in his honour. But these things cannot compensate for death, and the arrow which has pierced Ali Asghar's throat may continue to irritate the throat of your conscience." (Chughtai, "A talk with one of Urdu's most outspoken writers" Mahfil, 1972, p. 169-188)

Mantonian literature was widely advocated, propagated and praised by many well-known contemporary writers. To understand Manto one is supposed to put all the realistic approaches to get what Manto thought about the societies and the nation, both India and Pakistan during the mass exodus in 1947. During the conclusive obscenity trials in Pakistan's court, Manto was, at first, denounced by Syed Ziauddin who stated that Manto's work was obscene — all of it, and it could raise the sexual fascination of the reader at the same time — but subsequently, he was proved wrong by some well-learned people in the court who upheld Manto in every possible way and articulated their understandings about the short story *Thanda Ghost*.

The long list of almost 32 defense witnesses was issued and the 'Magistrate, Class 1' agreed to some 14 defense witnesses shortlisted by the defense lawyer. The first defence witness among them was Syed Abid Ali Abid, the principal of Dayal Singh College Lahore, in his statement said, "I have read *Thanda Ghost*. It's an outstanding piece of literature. I have read all of Manto's writings. Manto has a special position among the prominent short story writers after Prem Chand. In Reading *Thanda Ghost*, the overwhelming impression one gets is of the punishment Isher Singh (the main character of the story) is meted out by nature — impotence in return for his vile act." Answering many questions Abid Ali, every time came up with stunned statements and his understanding regarding *Thanda Ghost*, he further stated, "From Wali to Ghalib, everyone, at one time or another, has written what can generally be labelled as obscene. Literature, in my opinion, can never be obscene. What Manto writes is literature. Literature is a critical commentary of life. The words and deeds of every reasonable person can be meaningful. Every word and deed can be interpreted as good or bad in the eyes of society, and there are several yardsticks to judge it. All my sons and daughters have read this story. I have had academic discussions with one of my daughters, a fourth-year student in college, on many subjects, including matters related to sex, which also



happens to be part of her syllabus. On *Thanda Ghosth*, I have also had discussions with several literary persons. They have all appreciated it.”

The next defense witness was Mr. Ahmed Saeed, Professor of Psychology, Dayal Singh College Lahore, who delivered some appropriate information about *Thanda Ghosth* and applauded Manto’s work, he stated: “*Thanda Ghosth* is not obscene. It discusses a serious sexual problem. In my view, the concept of obscenity is relative. A story like *Thanda Ghosth* can only be sexually provocative to a person who is mentally sick.” (Ahmad, “Pakistan’s First Obscenity Trails”, np)

From the above statements, we get the whiffs of realism. Inevitably, Manto was not a writer of common thought processes. He changed the scenario of literature and provided some significant wisdom about how one should appreciate and decipher factual literature. Those who were wise, at that time, appreciated Manto’s work in his presence. “What gripped me about Manto was his free spirit and his courage to stand up against orthodoxy of all kinds. No part of human existence was a taboo for him. His stories were never about large events; instead, they were always very intimate. His protagonists were often those on the margins of society, such as the pimp, prostitute, local thug or tongwala. He saved his most emphatic gaze for women, especially the sex workers whom nobody was writing about.” (Das, “Excerpt: Manto and I”, np)

Conclusion

In this domain of fictitious literary realism, it is difficult to manufacture a deconstructed study to preserve an artist subjected to persecution, prosecutions, and trauma. Literature represents purity and must not be described as obscene. What society considered filth, Manto considered sacred and set about to write vulgarity in the form of exalted lyrics to let the world know literature has the patience to confront and endure all the bitter ordeals, not humans who gave birth to violence, rapes, and assassinations. Manto was a literary genius who took tempting initiatives to explore the man-made profanities within and around society. He was never afraid of what the world thought about his work but felt fatigued when his works were considered obscene. The world produced a myriad of literary fiends who met with the same fortune, but later they were honoured and facilitated posthumously. On the contrary, Manto faced trial after trial but was never given literary significance because he spoke the truth and people who are Janus-



faced deny the truth, whether that is Manto's truth or someone else's. Literature has no constrained thresholds, and it never deters anyone from writing. Furthermore, literature never interrogates us to write only polite and modest stories. This world, we are living in, is a mixture of both modesty and profanity — humility and savagery and among the writers, one has to step forward to write the opposite of modesty and humility. Manto did the same; he selected the opposite of modesty and humility. While people were engaged in writing good fictional stories, he penned down the prevailing truths. In conclusion, this paper defends Manto's literary creation Thanda Ghosth from all the allegations and inaccurate accounts that left him outraged and endangered. If Manto had survived, he would have never been acquitted from the disastrous bars of prison due to the imperialistic designs and objectives.

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