“COMRADE MANTO”

Revisiting Saadat Hasan Manto’s Progressive Writings

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Introduction

• Saadat Hasan Manto, one of the greatest Urdu writers of the 20th century, started his initial writing career in 1930s pre-partition India shaped by his admiration for the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia on one hand, and the struggle waged by Bhagat Singh and his comrades for Indian freedom locally.

• These feelings are clearly brought out in Manto’s earliest collection of short-stories Aatish Paray (Nuggets of Fire, 1936) and his 1940s essays Manto kay Mazameen (Essays of Manto), which were hailed by the Indian Progressive Writers Movement.
The most powerful story of the former collection is undoubtedly *Lover of Revolution*, which is also partly autobiographical and chronicles the transformation of a carefree young man into a thoughtful person vexed at the plight of the downtrodden:
“They call me a madman, they whose pulse of life is dependent on the blood of others, they whose paradise has been built by bricks borrowed from the hell of the poor; every note of whose instrument of ostentatiousness is covered with the sighs of widows, the nakedness of orphans, and the mournful wails of heirless children. Let them call me that, but a time is coming when these very people shrouded in poverty will write their curses dipped in the collective blood of their hearts upon the foreheads of these people. That time is near when the doors of earthly paradise will open for every man. I ask if I am in comfort, then why should you live a life of misery? Is this humanity then that I, being the owner of a factory, watch the dance of a new courtesan every evening, every day waste thousands of rupees in gambling, and spend money ceaselessly on my weakest desires; and my workers can’t even afford one square meal; their children pine for an earthen toy. Then the fun is that that I am civilized, am respected everywhere, and those whose sweat prepares my pearls, are seen with contempt in the social circle. I hate them myself, you tell me, aren’t both these oppressors and oppressed unaware of their responsibilities? I want to make both of them aware of their responsibilities. But how to do it? I don’t know.”
• His second short-story collection was also political and contained such explicitly anti-colonial gems like *New Law*, but a sign of imminent rupture with the PWA is given by a talk he gave at Jogeshwari College, Bombay in 1944, later inserted as a preface to this collection, in which he makes his views on the social realist literature championed by the Progressives explicitly clear:
“The greatest confusion has arisen about this progressive literature, although it needn’t have. Literature is either just that, otherwise it’s not; Man is just that, otherwise he’s not, but a donkey, a house, a table, or something else. It is said: Saadat Hasan Manto is a progressive human, what is this nonsense? Saadat Hasan Manto is human and every human should be progressive. By calling me progressive, people don’t describe any quality of mine, but prove their crudeness, which means that they themselves are not progressive, that is, they themselves don’t want progress. I desire progress in all fields of life. I want that you all should progress...A woman who works in the mill all day and goes to bed at peace in the night cannot be my story’s heroine. My heroine could be a cheap prostitute who is awake all night and while sleeping in the day sometimes sits up after having a nightmare that old age has come knocking at her door...How could I bare a culture, civilization and society that is already naked. I don’t even try to clothe it, because that’s not my job, but of the tailors. People call me black-penned but I don’t write on the blackboard with black chalk; I use white chalk so that the blackness of the board becomes even more evident...”
• Some of Manto’s essays clearly bring out his admiration and sympathy with the ideas of Karl Marx and the Bolshevik Revolution, something which not even his political Letters do; these are to be found in Maxim Gorky, Red Revolution; Peasant, Worker, Capital, Landlord. But the clearest indictment of his Marxist views comes from his radio play Karl Marx:
“Soviet Union is no longer a dream, a raw idea or a madness; it’s a concrete reality. A concrete reality which clashed with the steely plans of Hitler in war fields thousands of miles long, and which scattered fascism - ironclad fascism - into a million pieces. That socialism which used to be understood once as mere fantasy of a few Don Quixotes; the socialism which was once understood as a source of idle play; the same socialism which was treated like a prostitute by several pious European nations; the same socialism which was trusted to be bereft of both religion and humanity. Today it is shining as a ray of hope for sick humanity in the vast fields of Russia. This is the same socialism whose map was prepared approximately 150 years ago by Karl Marx – he is worthy of our respect, he who found a source of equality and fraternity not for himself, for his nation, his race, his country, but for the whole world, for all humanity. Like a lily is born in the mud, in the same way the anti-capitalist Karl Marx was born into a family of capitalist Jews, on 5th May, 1818. He was but a child when his father opined about him that he would turn out to be a devil when he grew up. Whether Marx turned out to be a devil or an angel, our present generations already have some idea, the decisive conclusion will be in the hands of future generations.”
Yet a discussion of these by no means salutary radical views as well as his two earliest collections of short stories (Nuggets of Fire published in 1936; Short Stories of Manto, published in 1940), where he displayed his debt to Marxist ideas, has now been firmly held hostage to the whims of postmodernism, pseudo-nationalism (attempts to make him over as a true patriot and Muslim), and the academic fashions of the day, not just in scores of ‘special Manto issues’ brought out by various newspapers here but also in dramatic renderings of Manto’s craft; he is now marketed as a sole realist of partition and sexuality, or a great storyteller at best ala Maupassant, O. Henry and Chekhov, without an ‘agenda’.
Manto’s Duels with the Progressives

• However, much before the state it was the PWA in Pakistan, led by his old comrade Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi which renewed their old duel with Manto, and expelled him from that organization for displaying excessive bad taste in satirizing the events of partition in his collection of sketches, aptly titled *Black Margins*; and for his even worst taste by having an ex-communist-turned-reactionary ideologue and literary critic Muhammad Hasan Askari write its preface.

• Whether these morbid sketches were in bad taste or not, ‘progressive’ or reactionary, one thing is clear: Manto refused to take sides in chronicling this tragedy, and in retrospect it can be said that he came to terms with partition in a much better way than the Communist Party had, with its erroneous thesis of supporting the demand for a confessional country on the basis of religion rather than the right of self-determination.
‘Letters to Uncle Sam’: Anti-Imperialism, Anti-Capitalism & Humanism at Its Best

• Among victims of Manto’s ever-sharpening pen in his final years were Uncle Sam, and the beards, twin cancers which have gnawed at the very foundation of Pakistan to date.

• Saadat Hasan Manto’s prescient Letters to Uncle Sam were written in the early 1950s at a time of increasing financial insecurity, greater need for alcohol and sharpening of his pen, when the contours of Pakistan’s foreign policy were just beginning to be shaped by an unconstitutional government; though written in a bitingly satirical vein, they contain a remarkable overview of history, politics, culture and international relations of the period, as it affected not only Pakistan and India, but the wider world as well.
The tone of his letters gets progressively harsher as he proceeds to chastise American capitalism as manifested by its consumerist culture, as well as the various defence deals the US has conducted with both Pakistan and India, and the state of democracy in his own country.
"A small, tiny atomic bomb I’ll definitely demand from you, it’s been a secret wish of mine since long that I should do one good deed in my life. You will ask, what is this good deed? You have done many good deeds though, and continue to do so; you wiped out Hiroshima, turned Nagasaki into smoke and dust as well as giving birth to millions of bastard American kids in Japan. I want to kill a dry-cleaner; some of our maulvis (clerics) here have a particular way of cleaning themselves after they urinate – but what will you understand – anyways it is like that after urinating they pick up a stone to clean themselves and reaching inside their shalwars while walking about throughout the bazaar openly dry-cleaning themselves. I just want that immediately after seeing such a person, I take out the signature atomic bomb which you gift me from my pocket and throw it at him so that he alongwith the stone blows up in smoke. The military pact with us is a great success, do stick to it. Over there with India you should also establish a similar relation, sell outdated weapons to both because you must have made redundant those weapons which you used in the last war. Your spare weaponry would be useful this way and your factories would not remain idle. Pandit Jawaharal Nehru is a Kashmiri, do gift him a gun which goes off after being kept in the sun; I’m also a Kashmiri but a Muslim. I have already asked you for the tiny atomic bomb. One thing more – the constitution has still not been framed here, for God’s sake send us an expert from there as soon as possible. The country can do without an anthem; but not without a constitution. But if you want, it can, as the poet says: ‘Whatever your miracle-working beauty wants, it does’."
Satire apart, Manto was probably the first observer who foresaw early America’s disastrous foreign policy in various parts of the Muslim world in the 1950s and 1960s leading right up to the war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, of assisting Islamic fundamentalist parties against the threat of rising communist and secular-nationalist forces, a process which has now come full-circle with the unannounced execution of one of their own armed mullahs Osama bin Laden, last year in Abbottabad.

His foresight continues to dazzle with insight almost sixty years later in his Fourth Letter (he ‘posted’ the letter in 1954), “India may grovel before you a million times but will definitely make a military aid pact with Pakistan because you are really worried about the integrity of this largest Islamic sultanate of the world and why not, as our mullahs are the best antidote to Russia’s communism. If the military aid starts flowing, you should begin by arming the mullahs and dispatch vintage American (drycleaning) stones, vintage American rosaries and vintage American prayer mats, with special attention to razors and scissors, and if you bless them with the miraculous prescription of vintage American hair dye as well then do understand that the cat is in the bag. The purpose of military aid as far as I understand it is to arm these mullahs, I’m your Pakistani nephew but I am aware of all your machinations but this heightened intelligence is all thanks to your politics (God save it from the evil eye). If this sect of mullahs is armed American-style, then the Soviet Union will have to pick up its spittoon from here, even whose gargles are mixed up in communism and socialism. It is evident that you will try your best to raise up the lower-lower and lower-middle classes, recruitment will begin from these two classes, but I’m telling you that our upper class is capable of accepting all types of dishonor because they have already had their eyes washed out in your laundries, but the lower-lower and lower-middle class will not tolerate any such thing.”
On Saudi Arabia: “I am recounting briefly the eyewitness and earheard account of Saudi King Saud’s Mecca. He reached Karachi via aircraft along with his twenty-five princes, where he was heartily welcomed. He has other princes too I don’t know why they didn’t come, maybe because two or three additional aircrafts would be required for the purpose; or maybe they are very young and they prefer their mother’s lap to the aircraft. It’s true: how can children brought up on their mothers’ and she-camels’ milk survive on Glaxo and Cow Gate dried milk. Dear Uncle! It is thoughtful that if King Saud had with him his twenty-five sons, by God’s grace, only God knows how many girls there would be, may God give them long life, and save the King from the evil eye. Tell me that in your state of seven freedoms is there any such iron man who has so many children? Dear Uncle! This is all courtesy our religion Islam and this high honour was given to whoever got it. In my humble opinion, you should immediately declare Islam as your state religion. It will have a lot of advantages. Nearly every married man would be allowed to marry four times. If a woman gives birth to four children, even with a lot of miserliness, by this rule then sixteen boys and girls should be proof of a man’s manliness and a woman’s fertility. Boys and girls can be so useful in wartime. You are worldly-wise, you know better. If initially your married men have any type of problem handling four wives simultaneously, you can invite King Saud here to make use of his services. You are his friend; you and his late father were bosom buddies. I heard that you arranged a caravan of very grand cars as a gift for him and his harem. I think that King Saud will tell you all his presidential prescriptions. Nearly every country except India and Russia is taking an interest in Pakistan these days and it is all a result of your kindnesses that you have extended a hand of friendship and cooperation towards us; and we became so capable that others also began to view us kindly. We Pakistanis are ready to die for Islam.”
Manto’s Pakistan

• Reading these words today, one can already sense that Manto had envisioned today’s headlines, not only in terms of the relationship of Pakistan and India with Uncle Sam, but even the threat of nuclear proliferation.

• The recent public execution of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan (after having lived there in hiding for years), the Memogate controversy where the Pakistani ambassador to Uncle Sam (in recent times he has come to resemble a mere clone of the various American proconsuls in the third world) had to resign following revelations that he tried to convince senior members of the American political elite via an unreliable fixer of removing the current Pakistani army chief and the tragic incident where NATO killed two dozen Pakistani soldiers last November, as well as the scarcely entertaining drama surrounding Pakistan’s invitation to the Chicago summit, and the continuing fallout in Pakistan-US relations since the recent visit by the present Prime Minister to Washington (in which case the American aid package was rolled out even before the premier’s plane had touched American soil), and the assassination of Hakimullah Mehsud in a US-drone strike, are only symptoms of the wider malaise.
Manto would have chronicled the wrangling over the India-US nuclear treaty and the failure of the Indian Left to make an impression in that struggle with disdain, as sure as he would have opposed the country’s newfound status as Uncle Sam’s proxy adjunct to halt the rise of China, probably bringing with it the license to do its own bidding in Kashmir (Manto was a proud Kashmiri himself).

Neither would his ever-ready cynical eye have been slow to deconstruct the so-called India-Pakistan peace process which appears at the moment largely dictated by Uncle Sam’s interests and the interests of its arms manufacturers and lobbyists, as well as the mammoth armies of its two fawning nuclear-nationalist nephews; the ordinary people haven’t really benefitted from this process, ensconced as they are in a debilitating cycle of visa restrictions.
Manto’s Secular Politics

- Not content to take on the imperial interference of Uncle Sam in Pakistan’s affairs, he then took on the custodians of religion, in several sharp essays like *Veil Talk:*

  “On a grass patch near the footpath of the Mall Road, a man was sitting cross-legged and telling his friends: ‘There are many types of women who wear the veil. One type is those who just cover from their relatives, they don’t feel shy from unknown men; another type is also of those women whose veil is limited to men of their immediate street: they will travel the whole city with the veil either tucked under their arms or will keep shifting it from one place to another as the occasion demands, but upon entering their street will immediately cover themselves; however, the more dangerous ones are those who do wear the veil, but not behind it.’”

- “In the tonga a burqa-clad girl said to her fellow burqa-clad, ‘Today our science teacher was telling us that black things absorb a lot of heat. Then why do we wear these black burqas?’”
“A boy was standing near the Queen’s (Victoria) statue, saying to his friend: ‘What is this unveiling ceremony? When the statue is ready, no one covers it up, but as soon as it is set up, it is covered by a black sheet and some eminent person is requested to unveil it. I think the issue of the veil is also similar.’”

“An elderly person is in conversation with his children at home: ‘At the moment in India – I mean in Pakistan – two curses are very common: Unveiling and Progressiveness. Both are intimately linked. Unveiling creates indecency, and progressiveness nudity.’”

(Bitter, Sour and Sweet, 1948)
In Manto’s arguably most prescient essay, “Allah Ka Bara Fazal Hai” (By the Grace of Allah), he envisages a future where everything from music and art to literature, newspapers and even the poetry of the country’s national poet, Muhammad Iqbal, would be censored and banned, to create, literally a ‘Pakistan’ (Land of the Pure):
“By the grace of Allah, sirs, all other curses in addition to music are no longer to be found and God willing, slowly the curse of life will also go away. I mentioned poets. This was a very strange phenomenon, no care for Allah or His Prophet, just following lovers. One is singing the praises of Rehana, another of Salma, all power and strength be only to Allah. Now their tresses are being admired, then their cheeks; a tryst is being dreamed about. What dirty thoughts these people had, O woman! But now by the grace of Allah, sirs, firstly women have become scarce, and the remaining ones are safe in the four walls of their homes. Since this land was purified of the poets’ existence, the air has become totally clean and pure. But I didn’t tell you, towards the last phase of poetry, a few poets were so born who used to versify workers instead of lovers, praising hammers and sickles rather than tresses and heart troubles. By the grace of Allah, sirs, good riddance from these workers, they wanted revolution, they be damned. Did you hear? They wanted to overthrow the government, the system of society, of capitalism and God forbid, of religion. By the grace of Allah we humans are rid of these devils. The people had become wayward and started to voice illegitimate demands for their rights, wanted to set up a secular government by waving flags. Thank God now not even one of them is among us and a million thanks to God that we are now ruled by mullahs, and every Thursday we treat them to sweets.”
Comrade Manto: A New Left icon for the 21st Century

• He would have identified with the global New Left which was taking shape in the 1950s and 1960s and would have been its spokesman in Pakistan had he lived long enough to see the effects of dictatorship in Pakistan, leading to the eventual break-up of the country, and would have cynically and brilliantly deployed his caustic pen against it.

• Thus Manto’s socialist, secular, anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist views in pre-partition India and post-partition Pakistan make him an unlikely and neglected role model for the communist Left and an icon for construction of a united South Asia in the 21st century, away from the politics of the ‘official’ communist Left which shunned him in the 1950s and in fact supported the partition of India in 1947 (unlike Manto).
• He continues to be relevant as a harbinger of leftist, secular and progressive thought for a united South Asia on non-communal, nonsectarian lines amid the poisonous cauldron of South Asian nationalistic politics (India, Pakistan, East Pakistan and Kashmir) since the 1950s until the present time.
And here he is again on the aesthetics of kissing, “I would also like to say something to you about the kiss-proof lipstick which you had sent. It has spectacularly failed among our upper classes. Girls and ladies have observed that this is ‘kiss-proof’ in name only, but I think even the way they kiss is wrong. I have observed them during these acts, it seems as if they are eating a slice of watermelon...please send an American lady via air immediately who will make the difference between eating a melon slice and kissing totally clear to our upper class...”