Images from the Periphery:
Politics, Manto and Morality

HARISH NARANG

Manto once observed that "If I have an interest in politics, it is as much as Gandhiji has in cinema. He does not watch cinema and I don't read newspapers."[1]

It was as tongue-in-cheek a statement as the one he made stating about himself in third person – "He is a fraud of the first order."[2] And yet his critics believed him fully – for once. Davinder Issar, for instance, makes a categorical statement: "Manto had no interest in politics."[3] Issar, like Mumtaaz Sheeri, Haneef Rameh, Muhammed Hasan Askari and a host of others, is taken in by Manto's stated word despite a warning by Krishan Chander – who else knew him better! – that "He says all this – only formally – sometimes to hurt you, sometimes to tease you. He says all this to also delude himself but his eyes say something very different."[4]

We know what Davinder Issar and others are saying about Manto's lack of interest in politics is simply not true. Nor can it be – about any author, for that matter – for we know that literature has a very close relationship with the society that produces it, particularly its economic and political circumstances. In spite of a writer's strong claims about his absolute freedom and of clamour for political neutrality of their works raised by various writers from time to time – Manto's statement quoted above is a case in point – the fact remains that literature reflects in one way or another the socio-political conditions of its times. Let us recall that a piece of literature is a social phenomenon – it is written by someone, for someone and for communicating something – and that its writer is a social being too – he/she is someone's son/daughter, someone's colleague, someone's friend, someone's lover, someone's husband/wife, someone's neighbour, someone's adversary, etc. – who is himself conditioned by politico-economic circumstances around him/her. Any serious work of literature is, therefore, not only a living document of contemporary happenings – social, economic and political – but also of the political processes underlying them. Literature develops along with life as a writer seeks the truth about himself, the world and current events. His search for truth takes a writer to fields like culture, education, history, language and of course politics. Politics, it may be necessary to clarify at this juncture, does not refer to the partisan politics of any particular party or group but to the ideological differentiations between various sections of society and the perpetual conflicts arising from them.

Beginning with a piece of reality – it could range from an encounter between a man and a woman to a clash between two communities, as is often the case in Manto's stories – a writer moves away to the level of what has been called 'the artistic concreteness' where he creates a world of his own, a world in which through the creation of individual characters who may be imaginary or real, or both, he investigates the social being of man, the role of certain sections of the society in history, the conflicts of their interests and the nature of their clashes and cleavages. It is through the study of these characters that a writer gives an idea of the mentality of a people, their moral attitudes, their ideas and aspirations. It is with this very intention that Manto, for instance, has created a Sugandhi, a Babu Gopinath, a Mangu Kochwaan, a Kulwant Kaur, a Khalid, a Neeti and a Bishan Singh (Toba Tek Singh). Through each of these characters, the writer distils the historico-politically significant phenomena and reveals links between literature and society. Each of these characters by Manto, for instance, gives us a glimpse into the various stages of socio-political developments and the evolution of his times. However, it is by going beyond the immediate reality around him that a writer rises to a universal level where a new artistic reality is born, a reality which is not only very different from the objective one but which is aesthetically interpreted. Such is the case with Shakespeare, Cervantes, Goethe, Prem Chand, Chinua Achebe, Garcia Marquez and of course Manto.

A writer's attitude plays a very crucial role in depicting this reality. In fact, no correct evaluation of a book or a writer is possible without probing into the writer's attitude to life because a piece of literature is not merely a dream but, as we have stated earlier, an act of deliberate communication, a choice of verbal gesture for advocating a certain point of view. In the words of Joan Rockwell:

> For the student who wishes to use literature as a key to the specific values of a period or cultural area, the point is TO DISCOVER THE AUTHOR'S INTENTION.[5]

That is why books written on the same theme by different authors turn out to be different in quality and value. To turn to Manto once again, he is not the first one to have portrayed the life of prostitutes in either Urdu or other Indian literatures and yet his insights are more fresh, more poignant and more hard-hitting than those of most others. This is equally, if not more, true of his treatment of the tragic trauma of the partition of India on the eve of independence in 1947.

A writer, therefore, does not only portray reality but as renowned Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiang'o puts it, he also persuades us to view it from a certain point of view. There is, therefore, no such thing as art for art's sake or a position of neutrality for an author. Chinua Achebe, the renowned Nigerian novelist, has called such art as 'deodorized dog shit.' There is no neutral stance between various points of view simply because it is contrary to

the reality of life wherein everyone is forced to take sides all the time on all kinds of issues. In fact, Ngugi wa Thiang'o goes on to claim:

> Literature cannot escape from the class-power structures that shape our everyday life. Here a writer has no choice. Whether or not he is aware of it, his works reflect one or more aspects of the intense economic, political, cultural and ideological struggles in a society. What he can choose is one or the other side in the battlefield: the side of the people, or the side of those social forces and classes that try to keep the people down. WHAT HE OR SHE CANNOT DO IS TO REMAIN NEUTRAL. EVERY WRITER IS A WRITER IN POLITICS. THE ONLY QUESTION IS WHAT AND WHOSE POLITICS.[6]

But what about Saadat Hasan Manto? Does he too, as per Ngugi's assertion and contrary to the claims of his critics – and his own too – have a politics? To discover the 'what' and 'whose' of politics in his writings, we analyse below some of the selected short stories by Manto. The focus, however, will be primarily on the community of the people he chose to create – their hopes and fears, their successes and failures, their motives and morals. However, before we do so, it would only be appropriate to remind ourselves, very briefly, the socio-political circumstances that surrounded this imaginative world of Manto.

The creative span of Manto's life extends for about twenty years, beginning with the publication of his first story "Tamasha," in 1934, and ending with his death on January 18, 1955. Manto continued to pen stories till the very end of his life – literally. Those years – between 1934 and 1955 – were turbulent times truly, bringing about cataclysmic changes not only in the Indian sub-continent but in the entire world. By the time he came to write his first short story, the world was already heading towards another world war which, as later events were to prove, left behind an unprecedented trail not only of death and destruction but of shattered empires and economies. It led to one kind of power-equation during the war, bringing political adversaries like the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. on the same side and to another kind of equation immediately after the war, bringing former enemies like the U.S.A., Germany and Japan on the same side of the post-war political divide. Old colonial empires like Britain and France faded into the oblivion of history and the U.S.A. and the Soviet Union emerged as the new Apollos of the bipolar world. The period also saw the completion of a socialist revolution in China, and the lighting of hundreds of fires of national struggles throughout the world, mainly under the inspiring support of the Soviet Union. No one in the entire world – literally – remained unaffected by these events. Manto's frequent references to the 'aalami jang' – the world war – and the power of the Soviet Union and the U.S.A. in his writings – both fictional and non-fictional – bear testimony to the fact that he was affected by them. A powerful example of such writings is a series of letters he wrote to

the powerful President of the U.S.A. under the title "Chacha Saam ke Naam Khat."

Nearer home, the struggle for Indian independence which had been hotting up during the second half of the 30s received a temporary setback during the years of the war. To Britain it provided the much needed respite to formulate and set into action its strategy of dividing the country on communal lines and plunging the nation into the bloodbath of partition on the very eve of independence. The twin traumas – the physical one of being uprooted and forced to migrate and the psychological one of living in 'alien' conditions – which millions of people experienced living on both sides of the religious divide are something from which they have not been able to recover even after nearly fifty years of their occurrence. Communal riots in India which break out from time to time and the on-going bloody battles between the Mohajirs – those who migrated from India – and the other Pakistanis provide ample evidence of the non-acceptance of the rationale of partition by the people on both sides of the international border. The choice of partition as the theme of a large number of his stories – "Toba Tek Singh," "Mozel," "Khol Do," "Mootni," and "Khuda ki Kasam" to name only a few – shows how deeply Manto had been affected by it. Moreover, his attitude towards the partition, its irrationality places him in the category of political prophets.

All this – the world war, the Indian struggle for independence and the partition of the country – had a tremendous impact on the lives – both physical and psychological – of the people of the subcontinent. Particularly affected were the people on the periphery – economic and political. It is these people on the fringes of the society – urban poor, daily wage earners, small-time operators, prostitutes, pimps, drifters, and victims of the trauma of partition – who come to occupy the central space in the works of Manto. He is simply not interested in the middle and upper classes who are prim and proper in their behaviour and sanitised in their public postures.

And now for the stories. Was it a mere coincidence that when Manto came to write his first short story ever he centred it around the tragedy of Jalianwala Bagh massacre – the most violently political of events relating to the struggle for Indian independence? Incidentally, the story, "Tamasha" (A show),[7] was not written in 1919 when the massacre took place or in the years immediately following it but full fifteen years later. There could not be any question about the deliberate choice of the theme.

To capture the atmosphere of terror immediately before and also during the massacre, Manto creates a middle-class Muslim family in Amritsar:

> Khalid's father became scared stiff on hearing the news. Now he was sure that the eerie silence in the atmosphere, the overflight by planes, the patrolling by the armed police, the sadness looming large on the faces of the people and the blowing of a killer storm all foretold of an impending tragedy.[8]

While worried about the well-being of the family, particularly his young son, Khalid's father tries to save him from receiving the negative psychological impact of the atmosphere as well as the tragedy. On his son's persistent questioning about the surcharged atmosphere, his father tells Khalid that a great show – Tamasha – is about to be held in the city:

> "Khalid, leave me alone at the moment . . . go, play with your gun."
> "But what's written in it?"
> "It says here that there'll be a big show this evening." [9]

Khalid's father, afraid of carrying the conversation any farther, tells him a lie: "yes, there'll be a Tamasha."

When the sound of the firing reaches the house, Khalid reminds his father :

> "Abbaji, let's go! The Tamasha has begun!"
> "Which Tamasha?" said Khalid's father, hiding his terror.
> "The same whose advertisement leaflets were dropped by the overflying planes . . . the show has begun, that's why we can hear the noise of the fireworks."[10]

Khalid, however, is soon witness to one of the first victims of the massacre – a young boy who comes howling to the market square. He has been shot in the leg, is bleeding profusely and he collapses and passes out right below Khalid's room which fills the young child first with terror and then with anger. Told that the young lad had been punished by his father in the school, Khalid goes to sleep praying to God:

> Allah Mian, I pray that you punish properly the teacher who has beaten that boy so badly and please take away his cane the use of which draws blood . . . if you don't listen to my plea, I will not speak to you either![11]

The entire story is narrated from the point of view of the young school-child primarily to show the outrage the massacre created even on the minds of the very young. While Manto refrains from any formal moralising – he generally does not do that – the message is not lost on his readers. What Khalid is going to do against the cruel 'school teacher' when he grows up is not difficult to guess.

The political atmosphere of Amritsar in April 1919 – the Jalianwala tragedy took place on the 13th – continued to haunt the consciousness of Manto and he returned to portray its terror as well as the bravery of the people of the city in another story titled "1919 kee Ek Baat" (An Incident of 1919). The story is a first person narration by a character to his fellow passenger in train. The narrator himself – we are told – was a participant in peaceful protests that were being held against the banning of Gandhiji's

entry into Panjab and the expulsion of Dr Satyapal and Dr Kichlew from the city. The narrator describes one such spontaneous demonstration by the people – Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs – on the 9th of April which was the Ramnavami Day – a day sacred to the Hindus, for it is on this day that Bhagwan Ram is supposed to have been born:

> The news of the expulsion of Dr Kichlew and Dr. Satyapal from the city spread in no time like a wild fire . . . every heart was on fire . . . every moment there was the fear of an impending disaster . . . but brother, the enthusiasm among the people was tremendous too; all work had come to a standstill; the whole city was quite like a graveyard; however, there was a noise inherent in this silence. When the news came of the arrest of Dr Kichlew and Dr Satyapal, thousands of people collected to go to the Deputy Commissioner Bahadur and request him to withdraw the orders of the banishment of their beloved leaders . . . when the crowd reached near the Hall Gate then it was discovered that the bridge was being guarded by British horsemen.[12]

As the white horsemen fired on the crowd and as some fell and the rest fled, it was Muhammed Tufail, a small-time operator – otherwise known as 'Thaila Kanjar,' because he was born from the womb of a prostitute – who exhorted the crowd not to run but face the white policemen:

> I say don't waste your energies . . . come here, with me . . . come, let's kill those whites who have wounded our innocent people and also killed them . . . by God, together we can twist their necks . . . let's go. . . ![13]

Failing to stop them, he runs forward across the bridge all alone and surprises the two horsemen, felling one down and strangulating him. The second one empties his magazine on Tufail who, though killed almost instantaneously, does not let go the white soldier from his grip until he has snuffed life out of him.

It was this cold-blooded killing of Tufail or 'Thaila Kanjar' that had led the crowd to regroup, return and ransack the townhall, burn banks and kill five or six whites in retaliation to which the British staged the Jallianwala massacre. It is interesting to note that Manto would like to highlight the patriotic sacrifice of a Muslim of a dubious origin on a day sacred to the Hindus as a part of his recreating parts of Indian freedom struggle.

"Naya Kanoon" (The New Legislation) is yet another story with an overt political theme. 'Naya Kanoon', of course, refers to the Government of India Act which was supposed to herald the process of political freedom in India. Mangu Kochwaan, who as the second part of his name indicates drives a horsecart – tonga – as a means of public transport, overhears a couple of his customers converse about the imminent introduction of the 'Naya Kanoon.' Listening to snatches of details about the new Act, quite a few of which are in

English which Mangu, of course, does not understand, Mangu 'guesses' that 'Naya Kanoon' is something good for the people. However, it may be of interest to observe here that the members of the upper classes, from whom Mangu first hears about the new Act, look forward to it as something for their personal advancement. This is how some college students react to the news of its introduction:

> "The new Act has raised my hopes further . . . if Mr . . . becomes a member of the Assembly, then I'll be definitely able to grab a position in some government office."
>
> "Otherwise too, many new positions would be created. Maybe in the confusion something comes our way too."
>
> "Yes, yes, why not?"[14]

Mangu Kochwaan on the other hand is looking forward to the new Act because it would bring an end to the British rule in India and the continued exploitation of Indians.

> Ustad Mangu hated the British from the core of his heart and the reason for this hatred, he said, was that they ruled the roost here in India and perpetrated all kinds of cruelties . . . they came to borrow some fire and have now set up home here. They are too much, these sons of monkeys. They lord over us as if we were bonded servants of their forefathers . . .[15]

While the Marwaris, an Indian community comparable to the Jews because of their obsession with money-making through the business of money-lending, are apprehensive about the new Act imposing restrictions on their interest earnings, Mangu is happy at their discomfiture:

> The Marwari apprehension "Will there be a law about interest rates too?" was ringing repeatedly in his ears and sending waves of pleasure in his entire body. Twisting his thick moustaches many a time, he abused the Marwaris in his heart: "These bugs in the beds of the poor – the new Act would be like boiling water for them."[16]

Thus while Mangu is looking forward to the new Act as a multifaceted panacea for all kinds of exploitation by the British as well as Indians, he is highly disappointed to see everything exactly as before even on the first of April, the day the new legislation was supposed to have come into force. Everyone, including the British, continued to behave as if nothing new had happened and this upset Mangu very much. When he runs into an English soldier who berates him for suggesting excess fare for a certain distance and realising that the same soldier had heaped on him all kinds of insults on an earlier occasion the previous year, Mangu is not ready to take it from him any more:

> Even on the first of April, the same empty boast . . . even on first April. . . scoundrel, we are our masters now.[17]

However, to Mangu's great disappointment, the policemen who come to arrest him laugh at his being so naive and inform him that there is no 'naya kanoon.' It is still the same old Act which is in operation.

Through this ironic treatment of the continued exploitation of the ordinary people whether the Act is old or new, Manto once again endows qualities of selflessness and feelings of nationalism to yet another member of the community on the fringes – a poor tonga driver – while the so-called core community – college educated students, lawyers and businessmen – are all portrayed as the ones who'd like to exploit even the new Act to their personal advantage.

Manto's most powerful political stories are of course those relating to the tragedy of partition of the country into India and Pakistan which as we know involved cold blooded massacres of millions and the uprooting and migration of millions of others. The tragedy of partition has been made the theme of their creative writings by a very large number of Indian and Pakistani writers – Yash Pal, Bhisham Sahani, Qurtulain Haider, Khushwant Singh and Krishna Sobti, to name a few – but seldom has anyone of them portrayed the people's plight as powerfully and as precisely as Manto. However, what sets Manto really apart from most of them is his incisive irony and scathing satire in exposing the communal feeding of fires through acts of wanton violence, the victims of most of which are, once again, poor, helpless innocent people. Through the depiction of the trauma of these ordinary people, Manto captured the very tragic face of mankind – caught for ever in the dilemma of hope and fear, failure and success, morality and immorality.

"Khol Do" (Open up) is one of the most powerful stories ever penned by Manto. An old Muslim – Sarajuddin – is separated from his grown-up, beautiful daughter while fleeing to Pakistan. Since his wife had been killed by the rioters, Sakina – his daughter – was his only hope and in the refugee camp he appeals to a group of eight young men – razakaars – to help locate his daughter. One day the razakaars are able to find and capture this stunning beauty. However, on Sarajuddin's enquiry they hide this fact from him, assuring him that they'd surely be able to find her.

One day Sarajuddin hears that a girl – almost dead – has been brought to the camp hospital and he rushes there to find that she is indeed Sakina. Apparently she has been repeatedly raped almost to death by the razakaars. The room is stuffy and the doctor on duty motions Sarajuddin to open the window, saying 'Khirki khol do.' This sets into motion automatically the hand of the near dead girl in coma and it unties the salwar, pushing it down. Unmindful of what might have befallen his beloved daughter to trigger off such a reaction on the mere mentioning of the words 'Khol do' – open up –

the old man shouts in joy – "Zinda hai – Meri beti zinda hai" (alive – my daughter is alive).

The irony of Muslim Safina escaping from the clutches of the Hindu rioters and falling a prey to the lust of her own co-religious Muslim razakaars – those who were supposed to rescue all such victims – is not lost on its readers, nor is the fact that it is women who are the ultimate victims of all such atrocities perpetrated on them by their friends and foes alike. The spontaneous euphoria of her father Sarajuddin on suddenly discovering that his beloved daughter was after all not dead is the only redeeming feature in an otherwise sordid tale of beastly behaviour of man.

"Toba Tek Singh" is yet another well-known 'partition' story which highlights the poignancy of the human tragedy as also the political bankruptcy of the solution of dividing not only land but also the people who had lived together for centuries, creating a unique blend of cultural life. To drive home his point that such a solution and the manner in which it was implemented was nothing but an act of lunacy, Manto chose a group of lunatics – literally – in an asylum in Lahore:

> All that they knew was that there is a man called Muhammed Ali Jinnah who is known as Kayad-e-Azam. He has made a separate nation for Muslims which is called Pakistan. Where is this located? What is its situation? They knew nothing about these things. That is why all those insane people in the asylum whose sanity hadn't broken down completely were in a fix whether they were in Pakistan or India. If they were in India then where was Pakistan located and if they were in Pakistan how was it possible that while staying put here, at the same place, they were in India until a few days ago.[18]

After the two governments had decided to divide the lunatics too on the basis of religion, the reactions of inmates displayed a unique sense of solidarity with the place and the people. One Sikh lunatic observed to another Sikh:

> "Sardarji, why are we being sent to Hindustan? We don't even know their language."[19]

Another climbed a tree, saying that he'd like to live neither in Hindustan nor in Pakistan but he'd rather live on that tree itself.

The protagonist of the story who carries the burden of Manto's message is, however, a lunatic named Bishan Singh who was popularly known as Toba Tek Singh, because he belonged to a place with that name. He had been in this asylum for a long time – fifteen years or more – and had refused to either sit or lie down all these years. His visitors had regularly brought him the news of his growing up daughter. Suddenly the visits ceased in the wake of the news of partition and a worried Bishan Singh started asking about the location of Toba Tek Singh. Then his childhood friend Fazaluddin brought

him the news that his people had gone away to Hindustan and hoped that he too might be sent there. Bishan Singh asked him the same question – Where was Toba Tek Singh? Fazaluddin's reply that it was where it had always been did not solve Bishan Singh's problem. Fazaluddin first replied that it was in Hindustan but then corrected himself to finally state that it was in Pakistan. This upset Bisham Singh very much.

At the border where they were taken for exchange, Bishan Singh asked the same question – Where's Toba Tek Singh? In Pakistan or Hindustan?' The concerned official's chuckle and reply – 'In Pakistan' – made him run to the no man's land where he stationed himself like a rock, refusing to budge. It was here – on the no man's land – that he suddenly collapsed and died after letting out a big shriek.

Through "Toba Tek Singh" Manto showed not only the futility but the very lunacy of forcing people to give up their roots – physical, cultural and psychological. A typical Manto observation seems to be that even lunatics refuse to accept it. The Mohajirs'[20] failure to get assimilated into Pakistani society, the East Pakistani Hindu Bengalis' plight in West Bengal and the nostalgic past in which most Indian Panjabis of West Pakistan origin still force themselves to live, are the strongest testimonies to the prophetic message of Manto in "Toba Tek Singh."

As a conscious socio-political act, Manto wrote a number of stories around the lives of women, almost all of whom were from the fringes of the social fabric. Through his women characters, Manto provided women with much needed political space decades before women's lib movement burst on the world scene. He created women characters who show a lot of courage, self-confidence, generosity, fellow-feeling and a sense of self-respect in the face of adversity, hostility and brute force in a male-dominated unequal world.

"Licence" is the story of one such woman – Neeti. She is a beautiful village girl on seeing whom Abbu Kochwaan – a tonga driver – falls head over heels in love with her. While he makes his proposal for marriage instantly, Neeti weighs the same very coolly and carefully, showing a tremendous sense of maturity for one who has been suddenly confronted with such a situation. When Abbu is arrested and jailed for marrying a minor, she manages exceptionally well not only the household but also the affair of renting out the tonga. But then Abbu suddenly dies of tuberculosis which he had contracted during the hard jail life. Neeti finds herself on the crossroads of her life within six months of her marriage.

Living by renting out the tonga now becomes difficult because finding her alone and widowed, first Deena and then Maanjha make marriage propositions to her. A third one does something worse – he tries to rape her:

> Neeti was caught in a strange bind. For eight to ten days the cart and the horse had been lying idle in the stable. Besides the expenses on food for the horse, there was the rent of the stable. . . [A]s for Kochwaans, while

same had proposed marriage, others had tried to rape her and yet others had short-changed her on the hiring charges.[21]

Once again, showing exceptional self-confidence, Neeti decides on driving the tonga herself, as this appears to her as the only respectable way out of this mess. But then this is unprecedented in the world of tonga drivers. Well, she argues it with herself and her logic is impeccable too:

> And then she answered her question herself: Don't women work as labourers. . . ? Women working in offices . . . picking coals from heaps. Thousands of women work while sitting at home . . . what's wrong in it and then I have to live too . . . somehow . . .[22]

She ruminates over it for a few days and then finally decides that she'd drive the tonga herself . . . She has full confidence in herself.

> The news hit the city that a beautiful woman is driving a tonga. Everywhere people talked about it . . . people heard and waited for her tonga to pass their streets.[23]

Her business picks up and this does not go down well with other Kochwaans. One day the city committee official calls her and informs her that she can't be allowed to drive her tonga.

> She asked: "Sir, why can't I drive the tonga?" "You can't drive it without licence . . . if you drive it without a licence, your cart and horse would be confiscated . . . and A WOMAN CAN'T GET A LICENCE FOR DRIVING A TONGA," the city committee official replied.[24]

Her argument that if women could weave on looms and make a living, if they could carry loads and earn a living, if women could live by picking coals from heaps, then why couldn't they drive a tonga and earn their living was of no avail. Her final question was:

'. . . tell me, how do I make a living?'

The committee official's reply was typical:

'Go, sell yourself in the bazaar . . . that way you can earn more. . .'[25]

Neeti was stunned.

> Next day, however, she moved an application in the office of the committee. And she got the licence to prostitute her body.[26]

To portray an exceptionally courageous, mature and self-confident woman in an otherwise male-dominated gender-biased world, Manto turned once again not to some educated, upper-middle-class women but to someone from the fringes – an illiterate, village-bred, shy girl from the lower classes. Neeti was a 'Mochan' from Gujrat – a member of the caste of cobblers.

Starting from where he had left off at the end of "Licence," Manto wrote a large number of stories around the lives of prostitutes. Frank portrayals of the seamy side of the life that these unfortunate victims of male lust lead, these stories are also testimonies of a rare sense of boldness, courage, self-confidence and above all self-respect shown by them.

"Hatak" (Insult) is one such story. Sugandhi, the protagonist, is a prostitute who is hardly able to make a living for herself at the going rate of ten rupees out of which two and a half rupees are taken by Ramlal, the pimp, as his commission. Manto describes in detail the squalid conditions in which she lives:

> The room was very small in which innumerable things were spread around in a disorderly fashion. Three-four pairs of old, dirty chappals were lying under the bed. Placing his snout on them, a dog with an itchy, rashful skin was asleep there and was in its sleep making faces at an invisible object. Its skin had no hair at many places due to the rashes. If someone saw the dog from a distance, he would think that it was only an old, doubled up doormat lying on the floor.[27]

Sugandhi, however, is able to keep her humane behaviour intact even in such squalid, repulsive conditions. Manto tells us that Sugandhi was an extremely emotional girl:

> Sugandhi lived more with her head but as soon as someone said something soft and friendly, she'd immediately melt . . .[28]

It is because of her affable, easily impressible nature that Sugandhi is exploited by her customers. In fact, she lets herself be exploited willingly because their sweet nothings give her a thrill and let her forget the harsh reality around her. Madho is one such customer who exploits her for which she gets reproached by her pimp, Ram Lal:

> When he heard that Madho came from Pune and loaded himself onto Sugandhi, he said to her – "Since when have you made him your lover – it's a strange lover-beloved relationship. The rogue does not shell out a penny and yet enjoys you. Let alone enjoying, he even manages to extract money out of you. Sugandhi, I smell a rat in it. There is something in this scoundrel that has touched your heart." [29]

Sugandho, however, continues to let herself be exploited by Madho. But

Sugandhi's generosity is not confined to her own self. When the story opens, she is sleeping completely exhausted after a hard day's work. Her latest customer – a sanitary inspector – has just left 'after breaking her bones.' When Ram Lal, her pimp, calls on her saying that a 'gentleman' customer wants her and is waiting at the street corner, she is in no condition – physical or psychological – to cater to the whims of another man. But suddenly she remembers something:

> In this condition, when her head was throbbing, Sugandhi would never accept the proposal but she needed the money very badly. In the hovel next door lived a woman from Madras whose husband had been crushed to death under a car. This woman had to go home along with her youthful daughter but because she did not have the money for the fare, she was in a piteous condition. Only the day before Sugandhi had consoled her and said, 'Sister, don't you worry. My man is coming from Pune. I'll take some money from him and make arrangements for you to leave.' While it was true that Madho was coming from Pune, it was Sugandhi who had to arrange for the money. So she got up and began to change quickly. Within five minutes she had got out of her cotton dhoti, had put on a saree with floral pattens, applied rouge on her cheeks and was ready. She drank a bowlful of cold water from the pitcher and went out with Ram Lal.[30]

So here is Sugandhi, a prostitute, ready to stretch her body and mind beyond the limits of exhaustion for the sake of earning a few extra rupees to help an unfortunate fellow prostitute. However, Sugandhi, motivated as she is by a noble cause, is in for a surprise of her lifetime:

> Rolling an end of her saree on her finger, Sugandhi went forward and stood near the door of the corner. The Seth Sahib moved the light of the beedi near her face. For a moment the light dazzled Sugandhi's sleep-laden eyes. With the sound of a switch being put off, the light went out. Simultaneously, the sound of an 'ugh' escaped the lips of the Seth. And then the engine of the car roared and the car flew past.[31]

When the pimp informs her that the Seth has not liked her, Sugandhi is stunned. Standing there all alone, decked and wrapped in her special saree, she feels as if that 'ugh' was piercing her chest like the stab of a knife. She has never been insulted like this in her entire life. She has always been 'very friendly' and 'kind.' She recalls that once she had returned the money to a young customer whose purse had been picked by her servant.

When Sugandhi goes back home she finds Madho waiting for her. All her pent up anger against the insult heaped on her by that 'ugh' is suddenly released and she takes it out on Madho by chasing him out of her house in the middle of the night, abusing him in choicest epithets. Her anger spent,

she suddenly feels absolutely empty and lonely. Finally, after much thinking, she picks up the sickly dog and puts it beside her on the bed and goes back to sleep.

So, Sugandhi who was known for her emotion-filled, affable, friendly nature finally finds the insult inflicted on her – hatak – by a fellow human being too much to bear and decides to look for better company and companionship in a dog, though it is sickly and diseased. But before doing so she has given back to a male customer what she considers an unwarranted insult heaped not only on her person but all women. The 'ugh' by the Seth was an insult and rejection of all women as equals of men, and treating it as such, her act of insulting Madho is a rejection of all males and their attitude. What is, therefore, of real significance in the story is that a woman – and that too from the fringes – who is doubly exploited – for her poverty and her sex – has created for herself a space of self-respect around her and she guards it with ferocity. When this space is violated by a self-opinionated male customer with more money, she reacts violently, even viciously. The way she shoes away Madho at the end of the story presents an interesting contrast to her behaviour in the beginning of the story when she willingly lets herself be exploited by him physically as well as financially.

That Sugandhi was no 'accidental' or 'freak' creation by Manto is quite evident from the following observation by him:

> When some woman in my neighbourhood gets beaten by her husband everyday and then cleans his shoes, she gets no sympathy whatsoever from me. But I feel a strange kind of sympathy for a woman in my neighbourhood who fights with her husband, threatens to commit suicide and then goes away to see a film keeping her husband on tanterhooks for two hours.
>
> The heroine of my stories is a rank 'sinful' prostitute who stays awake at night but who, while sleeping during the day, suddenly gets up after seeing a nightmare that old age is knocking at her door.[32]

So here they are – a strange community, a strange conglomeration, a motley crowd of Kochwaans and 'Kasbis' – the word means a prostitute in Urdu – who carry the burden of communicating Manto's message to his readers: that even in turbulent times as were the forties and the fifties in our subcontinent, it is the community on the fringes of the social fabric – those hapless victims of man's exploitation at the hands of fellow men – which not only guards but which also carries forward whatever is of permanent significance in human society.

A number of Manto's critics have tried to present him as a 'purely' creative writer, free from any political or social prejudices, a kind of roving camera, as Christopher Isherwood would like a writer to be. This is how Muhammed Hasan Askari evaluates Manto's stories:

> Manto did through his stories what an honest (honest not in matters political but honest in a literary sense) and a true litterateur ought to have done while writing in those circumstances and so immediately after the events. He put the question of good or bad beyond the pale of controversy. His point of view is neither political nor social, nor even moral but literary and creative. Manto only tried to see as to what is the relationship between acts of cruelty from the different points of view of the perpetrator and the victim of cruelty.[33]

Not only does the above evaluation completely miss the essential point of view expressed by Manto in his stories, the evaluation is full of most obvious contradictions. Thomas Hardy had once defined a good story as the one which 'slaps us into a new awareness.' If there is one writer whose stories fit the bill, it is Manto. Not only the stories which we have analysed above but scores of those really 'capsule' ones published under *Siah Hashiye* (Black borders) or *Dekh Kabira Roya* (And Kabir cried when he saw) all slap you – and real hard at that – into a new awareness. And this awareness is nothing but – in fact, it cannot be anything else – socio-political. While Askari states very categorically that Manto has no political, social or even moral point of view, he does grant him a literary and creative point of view, as if these latter lie outside the domain of socio-politico-moral fabric of a society. As we had stated in the beginning of this essay, what is literary does not lie outside the domain of what is social simply because a piece of literature is a social document and its author a social human being. In fact, Manto has stated categorically: "If you do not understand your age, read my stories."[34] Askari concedes that Manto examines through his stories the question of cruelty and violence from the points of view of the one who inflicts it and the one who is a victim of it. Does the question of 'power' – who can and does inflict such violence and who must receive it because of being 'weak' – not enter the domain of such examination and does the author have no opinion or sympathy for or against the other? Is he/she a robot who has no mind, no heart? Does the author not show his preferences when Mangu is arrested by the police for demanding the implementation of the 'naya kanoon,' or does he not show his indignation when Neeti is denied a licence to ply a tonga but is given one to sell her body? Does he show Bishan Singh as a mere lunatic who can't stand being sent away from Lahore asylum and dies or does he not feel insulted when the Seth utters an 'ugh' and drives off leaving Sugandhi shattered? Are these questions – who does what to whom under what circumstances – not questions of power and empowerment and hence of politics?

To conclude, the choice of a community of people from the fringes who would show such a developed socio-political consciousness – the Mangus, the Neetis, the Sugandhis, the Khalids and 'Thaila Kanjars' – was a deliberate one on the part of Manto and as per Ngugi's assertion quoted in the beginning of the essay that 'every writer is a writer in politics,' Manto is a

writer in politics – very much and deliberately – and there is no doubt as to where his sympathies lie. He is, he is with the marginalised people, those survivors on the fringes.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Davinder Issar, *Mantonama* (Delhi: Indraprasth Prakashan, 1981), p. 11. This and all other quotations whether from Manto's writings or his critics have been translated into English by me.
2. Ibid., p. 21.
3. Ibid., p. 11.
4. Krishan Chander, "Urdu Adab ka Shahkar" in Davinder Issar, op. cit., p. 28.
5. Joan Rockwell, *Fact in Fiction* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 60.
6. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Writers in Politics* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1981), Preface.
7. The English translations of the titles, given in brackets, have been provided by me.
8. Manto, 'Tamasha' in Davinder Issar, op. cit., p. 43.
9. Ibid., p. 44.
10. Ibid., p. 45.
11. Ibid., p. 46.
12. Manto, '1919 kee Ek Baat' in *Dastavez*, Vol. 1, ed., Balraj Mehra and Sharad Dutt (New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 1993), pp. 145-46.
13. Ibid., p. 147.
14. Manto 'Naya Kanoon' in Davinder Issar, p. 51.
15. Ibid., p. 48.
16. Ibid., p. 49.
17. Ibid., p. 55.
18. Manto, 'Toba Tek Singh' in Davinder Issar, p. 171.
19. Ibid., p. 170.
20. Those Muslims who had migrated from India to Pakistan came to be known as 'Mohajirs' which literally means 'outsiders' in Urdu.
21. Manto, 'Licence' in Balraj Mehra, p. 29.
22. Ibid., p. 30.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid., pp. 30-31.
25. Ibid., p. 31.
26. Ibid., p. 31.
27. Manto, 'Hatak' in Davinder Issar, p. 75.
28. Ibid., p. 78.
29. Ibid., p. 76.
30. Ibid., p. 82.
31. Ibid., p. 83.
32. Manto, 'Adab-e-Jadeed' in Balraj Mehra, et al., Vol. 4, p. 27.
33. Muhhamed Hasan Askari, 'Hashia Aarai' in Davinder Issar, p. 238.
34. 'Adab-e-Jadeed,' op. cit., p. 27.