

NOTE

Saadat Hasan Manto

S K M writes :

SAADAT HASAN MANTO WAS born on May 11, 1912 at Samrala in Ludhiana district of Punjab of British Colonial India and died on January 18, 1955 (aged 42) in Lahore, Pakistan. He lived in both sides of the border and after partition of British India into India and Pakistan on August 14, 1947 on religious basis of the 'Two Nation Theory' of Mohammed Ali Jinnah (1876-1948), Manto migrated to Pakistan in early 1948. Truly, he was an Indo-Pakistani writer—a gifted writer above distinctions of country or religion.

In his earlier days Manto was film and radio script-writer and journalist. He published twenty-two collections of short stories, one novel, five collections of radioplays, and features (over 100), three collections of essays and two collections of personal sketches in his short span of life. He is still the model for contemporary writers for plot construction, bitter realism, and whimsical dialogue. However, he is best known for his short stories, 'Bu' (Odour), 'Khol Do' (Open It), 'Thanda Gosht' (Cold Meat), and magnum opus, 'Toba Tek Singhi'. Some of his works have been translated in other languages.

Manto was tried for obscenity half-a-dozen times, thrice before 1947 in British Colonial India and thrice after 1947 in Pakistan, but never convicted. He is often compared with the English writer-David Herbert Lawrence (1885-1930) who wrote about the topics considered social taboos. Incidentally, Lawrence's controversial and famous novel—'Lady Chatterley's Lover', though published in Paris in 1928, was published (after his death) in Great Britain in 1960 after a court decision that it was not an obscene publication.

Combining psycho-analysis with human behaviour, he was arguably one of the best story tellers of the 20th century, and one of the most controversial as well. When it comes to chronicling the collective madness that prevailed, during and after partition of India in 1947, no other writer comes close to Saadat Hasan Manto.

He started his literary career translating works of literary giants such as Victor Hugo (1802-1885), Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) and many Russian masters like Anton Pavlovich Chekov (1860-1904) and Maxim Gorky (1868-1936), in Urdu. Their collective influence made him search for his own moorings. This resulted in his first story *Tamasha*, based on the Jallianwala Bagh massacre at Amritsar, Punjab in 1919. While at Aligarh Muslim University in 1934, he soon got associated with Indian Progressive Writers' Association (IPWA) under the influence of eminent urdu writer Abdul Bari Alig. Though his earlier works, influenced by the progressive writers of his times showed a marked leftist and socialist leaning, his later works progressively became stark portraying the darkness of the human psyche, as humanist values progressively

declined around the Partition of British India in 1947. His final works came out in the dismal social climate and reflected an innate sense of human impotency towards darkness that prevailed in the larger society. To many contemporary women writers, his language far from being obscene brought out the women of his times, prostitutes and pimps included, in realism, never seen before, and provided with the human dignity they long deserved. He once told a court judge :

“A writer picks up his pen only when his sensibility is hurt.”

Manto wrote about the topics considered social taboos in Indo-Pakistani Society. His topics range from the socio-economic injustice prevailing in pre- and post-colonial era, to the more controversial topics of love, sex, incest, prostitution and the typical hypocrisy of a traditional chauvinistic male. In dealing with these topics, he does not take any pains to conceal the true state of the affair-although his short stories are often intricately structured, with vivid satire and a good sense of humour. In depicting the lives and tribulations of the people living in lower depths of the human existence, no writer of the 20th century came close to Saadat Hasan Manto. His concerns on the socio-political issues, from local to global level were expressed in his essays and letters to Uncle Sam!

On his own writing Saadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955) often commented :

“If you find my stories dirty, the society you are living in is dirty. With my stories, I only expose the truth.” □