

“Knives, Daggers, and Bullets
Cannot Destroy Religion”

Bombay was rife with fear and foreboding. The British had wielded the partitioner’s ax. Reports of horrific bloodletting in northern India, particularly Punjab, had turned the cosmopolitan city into a battleground of real and imagined hostilities along purportedly religious lines. Four good Punjabi friends, three Hindus and one Muslim, were parting company. Mumtaz was going to Pakistan, a country he neither knew nor felt anything for. His decision to leave was sudden but unsurprising. Relatives of his Hindu friends in western Punjab had suffered loss of life and property. Overcome with grief upon hearing of his uncle’s murder by Muslim gangs in Lahore, Jugal had told Mumtaz that he would kill him if violence broke out in their neighborhood. After eight days of stoic silence, Mumtaz announced that he was setting sail for Karachi within a few hours.

Jugal fell into a deep silence. Mumtaz became excessively talkative; he started drinking incessantly and packing as if departing for a picnic. When the time came for him to leave, they all took a taxi to the port, which was bustling

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with mostly destitute refugees heading for Pakistan. As they stood on the deck of the ship sipping brandy, Jugal begged Mumtaz to forgive him. When Mumtaz asked whether he really meant that he could kill him, Jugal replied in the affirmative and apologized. “You would have been sorrier if you had killed me,” Mumtaz asserted philosophically, “though only if you had realized that it wasn’t Mumtaz, a Muslim and a friend of yours, whom you had killed but a human being. If he had been a bastard, you would have killed him, not the bastard in him; and if he had been a Muslim, you would have killed him, not his Muslimness. If his corpse had fallen into Muslim hands, the graveyard would have an additional grave but the world would have one human being less.” “It is possible that my co-religionists would call me a martyr,” Mumtaz continued, “but I swear upon God, I will leap out of my grave and refuse a degree for which I took no exam.” “Muslims in Lahore killed your uncle and you killed me in Bombay. What medal do you or I deserve? What medal is your uncle’s killer in Lahore worthy of? I would say that those who died, died a dog’s death and those who killed, killed in vain.”

Becoming more emotional, Mumtaz explained that by religion he really meant the faith that distinguishes human beings from beasts of prey. “Don’t say that a hundred thousand Hindus and a hundred thousand Muslims have been massacred,” he told his friends. “Say that two hundred thousand human beings have perished. The great tragedy is not that two hundred thousand people have been killed. What is tragic is that the loss of life has been futile. Muslims who killed a hundred thousand Hindus might think they had eradicated Hinduism, but it is alive and will remain alive.

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Similarly, the Hindus who murdered one hundred thousand Muslims may rejoice at the death of Islam when actually Islam has not been affected in the least bit. Those who think religion can be hunted down with guns are stupid. Religion, faith, belief, devotion are matters of the spirit, not of the body. Knives, daggers, and bullets cannot destroy religion.”¹ Mumtaz then related the story of Sahai, a staunch Hindu fastidious in his habits and a paragon of ethical behavior despite making a living as a pimp. Sahai had come to Bombay from Madras to make enough money to launch his own retail cloth business. Caring and honest to a fault, he had opened accounts for each of the girls who worked for him. One day soon after the troubles began, Mumtaz found Sahai bleeding to death on the footpath in the Muslim locality of Bhindi Bazaar. Afraid of being implicated in the murder, Mumtaz considered running away. But the dying man called out his name and gave him a packet containing ornaments and money for a Muslim prostitute, Sultana. Mumtaz duly delivered the packet to a teary-eyed Sultana, along with her patron’s message urging her to leave for a safer place. After his Hindu friends disembarked from the ship, Mumtaz waved at them from the deck. One of them thought Mumtaz was waving at Sahai, eliciting Jugal’s wistful reply: “I wish I were Sahai.”²

There was evidently no dearth of Sahais in a Bombay otherwise imploding with pent-up frustrations and newfound hatred against other religious communities. A scrupulously honest and hardworking Hindu washerman, Ram Khalawan, refused to keep account of what he washed for a newlywed Muslim couple. He was indebted to the man’s elder brother, for whom he had worked for several years. The couple repaid

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his faith in both cash and kind. When he fell grievously ill after drinking poisonous alcohol, the wife took Khalawan to a doctor by taxi. He survived the ordeal and quit drinking altogether, which was not easy for someone who had to stand in water for hours on end everyday. After his wife had left for Lahore following partition and the outbreak of violence, the husband noticed that Khalawan had hit the bottle again. Once the situation in the city became untenable, he too decided to leave for Lahore. Since his clothes were with the washerman, he decided to fetch them before the curfew. As he approached the washermen's colony, he saw a group of inhabitants dancing with long heavy wooden sticks in their hands. They were all reeling drunk. He inquired whether they knew Ram Khalawan and was asked whether he was a Hindu or a Muslim. "I am a Muslim," he said. "Kill him, kill him," was the response. He caught sight of an inebriated Ram Khalawan, barely able to stay on his feet but wielding a fat stick and cursing Muslims. He called out the name of the laundryman, who initially raised his stick to hit him. Then all of a sudden, Khalawan stopped in his tracks and blurted out, "Sahib!" Gathering himself together, he told his carousing companions: "He is not a Muslim; he is my Sahib, Begum Sahib's Sahib. . . . she came in a motor car. . . . took me to see a doctor. . . . who treated me." The words failed to have any effect, and the washermen almost came to blows as they began arguing among themselves. Seeing his chance, the narrator of the story quietly slipped away. The next day, as he awaited the delivery of his ticket, the doorbell rang. It was Ram Khalawan, carrying a bundle of his freshly washed clothes. "You are leaving, Sahib?" he asked, teary faced. Begging forgiveness, he disclosed that wealthy men in the city

were inciting people to kill Muslims by plying them with free alcohol. Who could resist free alcohol? For the nth time Khalawan recounted all the favors the narrator, his wife, and his generous elder brother had bestowed upon him. He then shouldered the empty cloth in which he had carried the washed clothing and walked out the door.³

Neither of the two stories is typical of narratives foregrounding the ghastly carnage and human suffering that accompanied the partition of India. Authored by the acknowledged master of the Urdu short story, Saadat Hasan Manto, they do not glorify or demonize any community. There is no attempt to articulate a moral resolution to the unfolding tragedy or to escape it through nostalgic remembrances of a harmonious social milieu in the distant past. Partly autobiographical, both stories efface the distinction between fictional and historical narratives and, together with the broader corpus of his better-known partition stories, establish a riveting symbiosis between Manto's life and work at the moment of an agonizing historical rupture. For someone who liked to keep his ear close to the ground in order to weave tales out of facts gleaned from everyday life, Manto, the individual and writer, is ideal fare for the historian of partition. An astute witness to his times, Manto crafted stories that give a more immediate and penetrating account of those troubled and troubling times than do most journalistic accounts of partition.

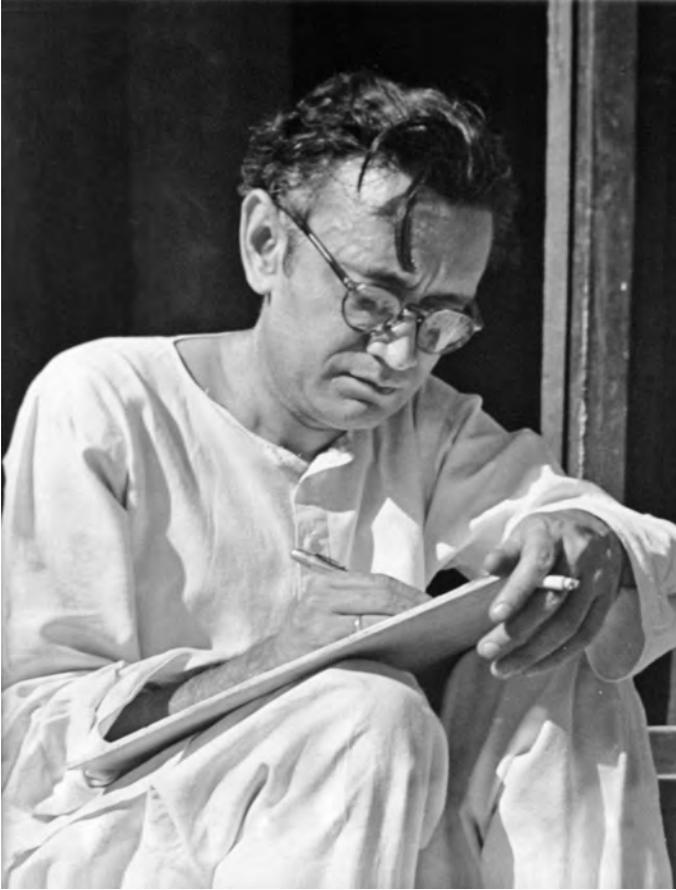
Creative writers have captured the human dimensions of partition far more effectively than have historians. Manto excelled in this genre with the searching power of his observation, the pace of his storytelling, and the facility and directness of his language. Unlike others who have written

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stories about partition violence to condemn its oppressive and dehumanizing characteristics, he was patently uninterested in its outward manifestations. Manto used his literary talent to reflect the consequences of partition for the lives of common people. He knew that cataclysmic events make the unusual seem ordinary. Nothing shocks the human consciousness numbed by displays of human bestiality amidst massive social dislocation. Ethical issues become irrelevant, and writing about them, whether as fiction or historical narrative, fails to make the news. Without making any kind of a value judgment, Manto wrote short stories that were not about violence as such but about people and their different faces. The perpetrators and the victims of their oppression interest him only insofar as they help to lay bare the all-too-human characteristics that can momentarily turn the gentlest of souls into the most demonic monsters. Neither an end nor a beginning, partition—with its multifaceted ruptures, political and psychological—was for Manto not an aberration to be dismissed as a fleeting collective madness. It was part and parcel of an unfolding drama that gave glimpses into the best and the worst in humankind. Through his close-range and personal picture of characters like Jugal, Sahai, Ram Khalawan, and unnamed murderers, Manto turns short story writing into a testament of his belief that human depravity, though real and pervasive, can never succeed in killing all sense of humanity. His faith lay in that kind of humanity.

What made Manto possible? His literary corpus is the best place to begin searching for an approximate answer. Proud and prone to displays of arrogance, he had a high opinion of his talent and place in history. Manto has been

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Manto writing, by Khatir Ghaznavi,
Lahore, 1954. Courtesy Pakistan
Academy of Letters, Government of
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likened to Guy de Maupassant, not for consciously seeking to emulate the French short story writer but because, like him, he aimed at exposing societal ills and the hypocrisies of life without losing faith in the inherent beauty within human beings.⁴ Manto was deeply affected by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's observation that man is born free but is everywhere in chains. To convey his thoughts and feelings on the matter, he taught himself the fundamentals of storytelling by reading and translating French and Russian writers like Maupassant, Zola, Hugo, Chekhov, Tolstoy, and many others. Later his exposure to Somerset Maugham, O. Henry, and D. H. Lawrence encouraged him to write about issues of sexuality in ways that were new and often disturbing for a segment of the Urdu readership. Despite this exposure to international literature, Manto in his choice of themes and linguistic techniques remained steeped in the literary traditions of the subcontinent. His unique traits notwithstanding, Manto is a good example of those writers from the colonized world whose universalist aspirations and cosmopolitan attitudes were rooted in regional languages, literatures, and cultures.

Manto's subjects were actual people faced with real-life issues whom he searched for in the dark and stinking alleyways of the cities he lived in and visited with friends in search of alcohol and entertainment.⁵ His most memorable characters are products of the illicit social exchanges that take place in these filthy and ill-famed urban neighborhoods. Whether he was writing about prostitutes, pimps, or criminals, Manto wanted to impress on his readers that these disreputable people were also human, much more so 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 that veil. Manto’s brand of literary humanism was shaped by multiple literary and cultural milieus—both global and regional. If an engagement with global literature of the French and Russian varieties honed his literary craft, his habitation of modernity was inflected by his location in a world of colonial difference, as well as myriad internal differences fostered by an alien colonial rule. Few writers were as adept as Saadat Hasan Manto at uncovering the everyday cosmopolitanism that transcended those differences. Exuding a sense of destiny that often surprised his peers, he made sure to leave behind an extraordinarily rich archive of insights into his life, personality, and writings. As he wryly commented in one of his typical tongue-in-cheek autobiographical pieces, it was quite “possible that Saadat Hasan dies and Manto lives on,” but that would be like an eggshell minus the white and the yolk.⁶ He dreaded nothing more than the prospect of Saadat Hasan’s living on while Manto died.

The name Manto comes from the Kashmiri word *mant*, meaning a stone weighing one and a half seer, or approximately three pounds, and is thought to refer to what his Saraswat Brahman ancestors were entitled to collect as rent from the cultivating peasants.⁷ Proud of his Kashmiri background, Manto claimed that *mant* referred to the scale in which his ancestors’ wealth was weighed. In a play on his own name, he once quipped that he was a “one two man,” who added up to three. If he hid his head and neck like a tortoise, however, no one could detect, far less understand, him. Critics wrote long essays on how he was influenced by Schopenhauer, Freud, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Marx, when

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he had read none of these luminaries. According to Manto, his proclivity for storytelling was quite simply a product of the tensions generated by the clashing influences of a stern father and a gentle-hearted mother. An understanding of Manto's family history, therefore, is enormously helpful in illuminating the complexities of his personality and the context for his development as a writer.