

OF TABOOS AND SACREDNESS: SOCIAL REALISM IN PAKISTANI SHORT STORY GENRE

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ABSTRACT

Literature is often conditioned by the socio-political conditions in a society. Consequently, in most cases, a bleak truth about society and history is exposed which is, sometimes, treated, owing to its apparent impropriety, as intolerable by many. This tradition of projecting social realism, in a fictionalized manner, about pre and post-independence Pakistan and Pakistani society has been kept intact, against all odds, by various short fiction writers – Ahmad Ali, Saadat Hassan Manto and Daniyal Mueenuddin being the most prominent of them. Ahmad Ali exposes, in many of his works, the social face of pre-independence Indian society, Manto X-rays, for most part, its post-independence body whereas Daniyal Mueenuddin gives a kind of ultrasonic analysis, predominantly, of its contemporary image, which, in many ways, is no different from pre-1947 era. The intended study assumes that Manto is the inheritor of the social realist tradition initiated by Ali, whereas Mueenuddin, in his short stories in English, inherits it from Manto. They share the basic themes and thought but develop them according to the social milieu of their times and their individual idiosyncrasies. So, focusing on these three short fiction writers, the proposed study aims to explore tradition of social realism in indigenous short fiction.

Keywords: Social realism, Pakistani short fiction in Urdu, Pakistani short fiction in English

INTRODUCTION

Realism is variably defined as “an approach that attempts to describe life without idealization or romantic subjectivity” (Khuman, 2010, p. 78); and as “a style in literature that presents things and people as they are in real life” (Siddiqui & Raza, 2012, p. 44), and also as “everyday reality as opposed to traditionally heroic, romantic, mythic or legendary subjects” (Kahari, 1982, p. 86) and it has, since long, been used as a technique in literature – literature, which, as we all know, is traditionally labeled as reflection of life. So, be it Chaucerian poetry or Shakespearian drama, realism has its presence in many great works, though it is partial in most cases giving space to idealism, romanticism, etc, alongside.

It was taken up as a movement by fiction writers of late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. It was specifically used as a literary term in 1856. So, in a historic sense, “Realism refers to a movement in nineteenth century European literature and theater that rejected the idealism, elitism, and romanticism of earlier drama and prose fiction. Realism as a movement is believed to have begun in France with Honoré de Balzac, Gustave Flaubert, and Guy de Maupassant and then moved internationally”, and was adopted by English writers such as George Eliot in England, and William Dean Howells in America. T.W. Robertson, Henrik Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw (Siddiqui & Raza, 2012, p. 44), and Henry James, are also considered to be the founders of this technique in literature as they are believed to have embraced realism in its embryonic stage. The phrase “social realism” has got a currency in place of the term “realism” in contemporary critical works in which it stands, invariably, for a

literary approach that helps reveal the dark suppressed face of society, harsh hidden realities about its inhabitants and bitter tabooed truths – the truths – about its practices ignoring its better side that is usually part of the popular social narratives. So, owing to its apparent indecency, it is treated as intolerable by many.

It is important to note, at this point, the difference between two similar phrases i.e. “social realism” and “socialist realism”. Despite the fact that both of them derive “from Russian inspired beliefs about the function of literature in a revolutionary socialist society” (Khuman, 2010, p. 81), social realism is meant to *describe* how things are, whereas socialist realism is to *prescribe* how things should be (Khuman, 2010, p. 84). So, the later kind of realism shares the desire which is characteristic to idealism and the dream which is characteristic to romanticism.

The tradition of social realism has been kept intact, against all odds and despite its apparent indecency, by the writers of short fiction in various Pakistani languages including English, since its emergence in 1930s, though with some imposed breaks. The founder of progressive writers movement in British India – Ahmad Ali; “the *enfant terrible* of Urdu literature” (Daruwala, 1996, p. 118) – Saadat Hassan Manto; and, the *landlord himself* – Daniyal Mueenuddin – may be called as the most prominent representatives of this tradition. Ahmad Ali, in his most famous works, exposes mainly the social face of pre-independence Indian society; Manto, in his Urdu short fiction, X-rays, for most part, its post-independence body whereas Daniyal Mueenuddin, in his recently published English short stories, gives a kind of ultrasonic examination, predominantly, of the contemporary Pakistani society. If properly interpreted, these realistically descriptive but very creative reflections of Manto-Mueenuddin literary laboratory may lead to the prescription of a useful remedy.

A cursory survey of the pre and post Independence literature in the Sub-continent would show the trajectory of intellectual thought so far: Ghalib is seen more concerned about his present, and about the universal philosophical issues; Bahadur Shah Zafar is often found lamenting the lost glory, and remains nostalgic with the melancholic memories of good old days; Deputy Nazir Ahmad urges youth to chase the ideals whereas Allama Iqbal decides to divorce the *gham-e-dosh* (sufferings of the past) and sets off for a *fikr-e-farda* (planning the future). His famous poem *jawab-e-shikwa*, apart from many others, is believed to have inspired many intellectuals of his time and those of afterwards and of contemporary era, and thus investigating the reasons of the decline, highlighting the *hamartia* of the society and planning a bright future inspired by the glorious past became the *raison d’etre* of the lives of many of them. However, not much intellectual exercise was required to work out that it was not the fate that caused this devastation rather it was a tragedy of errors. So, authors such as Ahmad Ali, Manto, Mueenuddin and several others seem to have given the fictionalized documentation of those errors which grew to cause this tragedy, and then, in the thirties and the forties and through the post-independence era, it became the *modus operandi* with many of the short fiction writers of exposing, with variable frequency and nature, the minor and major social evils probably to avoid more tragedies and to restore the golden history and restructure the discourse about indigenous societies. Although most of the Urdu progressive writing is characterized by a blend of realism and social criticism (Zeno, 1994, p. 41) yet among them there were writers who had belief in rather boldly exposing the brazen bitter truths of the society. So the publication of the works like *lihaaf* (blanket) by Ismat Chughtai, *Rais Khana* (royal house) by Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi and *thanda gosht* (cold flesh) by Manto, with their notoriously shocking appeal for the then readers, strengthened the tradition of social realism that had already been established by Ahmad Ali.

Ahmed Ali's first collection of short stories, *Angare* (burning coals), in collaboration with a couple of other fiction writers, was, in his own words, a "brave, adolescent book" (as cited in Coppola, 1994, p. 50). This collection was severely criticized and the then government banned it. Owing to the severe criticism by people such as Maulvi Abdul Majid Daryabadi, and murder threats by various reactionary forces, its contributors spent a few years of retirement but when they returned, they were found more blatant and determined than before.

Tariq Rahman (n.d., para. 1) rightly asserts that Ahmed Ali was the first to accept modernity and social-realism from Western sources among Indian Muslim writers. When Urdu short fiction was enjoying the imaginative flights of romanticism, subjectivity and aestheticism and the metaphorical language of Sajjad Hyder Yildirim, and Majnoon Gorakhpuri (Parekh, 1994), the realist Ahmed Ali's *Angarey*, in the words of Rauf Parekh: "... ignited a fire of anger throughout the conservative society of India that viewed the collection as obscene, blasphemous and a challenge to the moral codes and traditional norms of society".

Ahmed Ali's later ventures in realism are *Prison House*, *Our Lane*, *Shammu Khan*, and *Two Sides of the Picture*. *Our Lane* captures scenes of a pre-partition Delhi street picturing daily life (Rahman, n.d., para. 19) and "is characterized by its sense of realism and social awareness" (Encyclopedia Britannica). His other short story *Two Sides of the Picture* shows how conscious he was of the shift that he had undergone by accepting realism and modernity as this story presents the conflict between tradition and modernity. This consciousness had perhaps kept him on guard and caused a back shift in his life as the author of "obscene and blasphemous" *Angarey* brought out *Al-Qur'an: A contemporary translation* in 1984, which Tariq Rahman terms as his most surprising *tour de force*. However, he not only established and admired the tradition of social realism but also practiced it in some of his works, avoiding indulging in socialist politics from the very beginning.

The tradition of social realism was then adopted by his contemporaries in its varying colors such as: in Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi's unflinching humanism, in Ghulam Abbas' prescient vision, in Ismat Chughtai's openness, in Khadija Mastoor's abstemiousness, in Hajra Masroor's keen observation and, most importantly, in Saadat Hassan Manto's brutal directness.

Sparing the bright side of the society, Saadat Hassan Manto is mostly found nitpicking its dark side and bringing it in the limelight exposing the hidden politics and social compromises behind the overt. His ruthlessly realistic accounts of the sociopolitical hypocrisies were apparently ugly and horrible for many. This "downright honest and realistic portrayal of life and its stinging moral and political comment" invited the wrath of the authorities of the time and Manto was trialed several times for publishing stories such as *Dhuwan* and *Kali Shalwar* as they were considered vulgar (Kamal, 2012). His eccentricity, perverseness and "a mad passion which bordered on morbid reality" were even criticized by his own contemporaries such as Sajjad Zaheer, Ashfaq Baig and Sibte Hassan (Asdar, 2012). The uncouth and unconventional titles of his works such as *Ooper Neechay aur Darmian*, *Bu*, *Kali Shalwar*, *Thanda Gosht*, *Siah Hashiyay*, *Khol Do*, *Blauz*, *Pardey ke Peechhay*, and *Shaitan*, communicate much about their contents which are insecurity, terror, lust, rape, murder, and exploitation and their impact on readers is "dejection, melancholy, misery, resistance and challenge" but not obscenity or vulgarity (Shaheen & Qadeer, 2012, p. 227). The reason why Manto was disliked by both the parties – the progressive writers and the orthodox circles – was that he never took sides. In Syed Nomanul Haq's words:

It has often been observed that when telling a story about atrocities that are consciously wrought, exploitation that is deliberate, injustices done by choice, shady

businesses carried out by pimps and loafers in dark urban streets, in none of this does Manto take sides. (2012, Para. 5)

In the words of K. N. Daruwala, “Manto’s commitment to truth was so passionate and complete that it has to go unchallenged... His heart was in the right place invariably, and his scorn for the hypocritical and the sanctimonious was unmitigated. The characters that peppered his stories were out of the ordinary, often coming from the detritus of society. The whore, the pimp, the street bully (*dada*) jostled for place with those who fought for freedom. And there were, of course, the religious bigots, both Hindu and Muslim, whom he reviled (1996, p. 117-119).”

Manto’s *magnum opus*, *Toba Tek Singh* is the story of a lunatic’s romance with his soil. Even in this type of story, he goes on revealing the bleak truths of the society *sotto voce*. Fazal Din’s hint on Bishan Singh’s daughter Roop Kaur is perhaps the most nerve-racking information for the reader if not for her own lunatic father. While giving accounts of different types of the lunatics in Lahore insane asylum, Manto writes:

There were also a number of lunatics who were not lunatics. The majority of them were murderers whose relatives had bribed the officers to get them sent to the lunatic asylum, to save them from the coils of the hangman’s noose. (Manto, n.d.)

Whereas Ahmed Ali’s “creative output is limited” (Rahman, n.d., Para. 20), Manto is very prolific author of short fiction that covers almost all the socio-political themes. Unlike Ali, with Manto, tradition and modernity are in no conflict with each other; neither has he desired to come back to revisit and embrace the tradition nor does life allow him to do so as he lived just a half the age of Ahmed Ali.

The tradition of projecting the realistic sociopolitical face of the society was also disconnected for some time particularly during the martial rules when direct realism was to a much extent replaced with other techniques such as symbolism and allegory. Owing to the arrival of the young blood to the team of social realists, the recent years have, however, witnessed a great literary boost in Pakistan. Many of the contemporary writers avoid pretentiousness in their works and are giving the bold accounts of the subalterns. So, beggars, prostitutes, servants, farmers and other real life characters burdened by the conflicts between their morality and economic woes, and exploited by their landlords and *Peers* can be found in the present day short fiction. Akbar Natiq in Urdu and Daniyal Mueenuddin in English are two of the many representatives of the social realist tradition in the contemporary era.

In his recently published collection of short stories, Mueenuddin informs us about the “wonders” in the “other rooms”, and, in a way, warns us of the deceptions of popular social narratives as some persons, places and events exist so dimly that they are hardly noticeable to an untrained eye. The kind of callousness that Nawabdin Electrician has learnt from life and exhibited to the dying dacoit, and the irony in Nawabdin’s name and in the robbery scene despite the fact that he was a poor electrician with twelve daughters and a son to feed, are the wonders of the other rooms and roads of a Pakistani rural society.

Many of Mueenuddin’s female characters are frequently found in compromising states. Saleema’s addicted husband doesn’t mind it when her coworkers have sexual relations with her; Zainab’s brother, poor driver Mustafa rather happily makes the arrangements for the landlord Jaglani to have her at his private house; the educated job-seeker Husna allows Mr. K. K. Harouni to be the master of her body; and Lilly indulges in love making with several men, by choice.

So, from Manto to Mueenuddin, we come across many such accounts of the silent men who overlook the compromises that their women make. This realism slaps down the popular

ghairat narrative of the society according to which sex is a shameful thing but could be enjoyed secretly if it was economically convenient (Sobia Kiran, 2012, p. 179).

Critics of the social realist tradition have been blaming its leading figures as being lusty for cheap popularity, etc. But, the harshest social realist Sa'adat Hassan Manto saw more sufferings than rewards in his short life. This genuine struggle, though wry apparently, was very useful to ultimately bring a positive change in society. On one hand this tradition of social realism has been used as a shock tactic "to shake the readers out of their complacency" (Kiran, 2012, p. 179) and on the other hand it has made a great contribution towards the achievement of the kind of freedom of expression that we witness today, particularly, the one being exercised by Pakistani electronic media as well as the social media.

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