

# Saadat Hasan Manto and his craft

Lahore Dawn  
22.02

By Ashfaq Naqvi

TO COMMEMORATE the death anniversary of Saadat Hasan Manto, which falls in January, the Lahore branch of the Pakistan Academy of Letters arranged a meeting last week. It was heartening to see a large number of people attending it. Although the programme said that Anis Nagi and Amjad Tufail would be the only speakers on the occasion, many prominent writers present among the audience also joined in to express their views.

Comparing Manto with the other giant of short story, Maupassant, Anis Nagi said that both stood out for their stark realism, remarkable insight into the human psyche and vivid observation. However, he added, that where Maupassant produced only a few stories which could be accepted as great, Manto had a long list to his credit. He was a technician who knew the art of weaving a story. In fact, he brought about a revolutionary change in its very structure.

The other speaker, Amjad Tufail, spoke at length to make a critical appreciation of the various stories written by Manto which had become a legend in his lifetime. He said the present generation should rediscover Manto as his erstwhile writings were relevant to the present times.

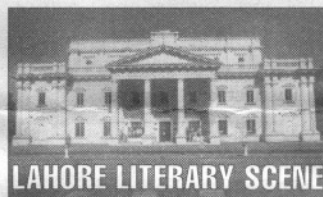
Giving his views, Dr Envar Sajjad said that being an anti-war person, Manto always wrote in condemnation of imperialism and in favour of liberty and independence. He said it was unfortunate that more notice had been taken of his so-called obscene writings than the other topics he had dealt with so lucidly. He demanded that a Manto chair be set up at the universities. (That reminds me of what the late Prof Abid Ali Abid once said: "Manto is still banned from the media and not included in the syllabus because he exposes the duplicity of the system in vogue and the crooked faces of the real culprits who destroy the moral values.")

Joining the discussion, Dr Salim Akhtar also regretted that Manto was still not found worthy of mention at the university

level. He said that some of his symbolic stories had greater depth than those of Kafka. He pointed out that people still remembered Ashfaq Ahmad for *Gadariya*, a story he wrote years ago and forget what he had written since. That is exactly what is happening with Manto.

Mahmud Gilani, who was also present that evening, was of the opinion that while dealing with sex, Manto seemed to have been influenced by DH Lawrence. Prof Shabbir Ahmad Chaudhry was all praise for Manto as he felt his stories were not only powerful but also natural and realistic.

Called upon to sum up the discussion, I referred to the remark of Dr Salim Akhtar about Ashfaq Ahmad. I fully agreed



with him as most of our writers are somehow equated with one major story that they have produced. For example, when talking of Ghulam Abbas, Ismat Chughtai or Balwant Singh, it is only their *Anandi*, *Lehaf* and *Jagga* which come to mind. But that is not the case with Manto; his very mention conjures a long list of short stories, one as good, or better, than the other. That is wherein lies his greatness. I, however, added that if asked to choose one story out of the numerous written by Manto, I would place my finger on *Hattak*. It was incomparable. Another thing remarkable about Manto's stories is their brevity; the writer does not waste words or indulge in unnecessary padding. He is straight and to the point.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

THE *afsana* is a brief fictional prose narrative as distinct from the novel and revolves around a small number of characters. It deals with a vast variety of subjects but some authors devote their entire attention to only one aspect. I am referring to Ghulam Saqlain Naqvi who is predominantly involved in

weaving stories about rural life. The villages enter his stories again and again. However, what I most appreciate about Naqvi Sahib is that he knows the art of brevity. He depicts, portrays, explains and says all that he wants to say within a limited space. This quality is found only in top class writers.

Ghulam Saqlain Naqvi has spent close on 40 years in the teaching profession but has continuously persisted with his literary work. He has written on novel and two travelogues. His 87 short stories are carried in seven published collections. In addition, he has a collection of humorous essays as well besides numerous newspaper columns, articles of literary criticism and character sketches of known literary figures, both living and dead. However, his first love remains the short story. I have before me his latest collection, *Nuqtay Se Nuqtay Tak* which he threatens would be his last as he wishes to lay down his pen after having used it for half a century. He is a truthful person otherwise but I wish he proves to be a liar this time around.

As stated earlier, Naqvi chooses rural life as the subject of his stories, but that is not all about them. He talks of the sickle, the spade and the tilling instruments as if they were reverberating with life. He goes on to give life to the earth, the water and the breeze blowing across the villages. He depicts rural life in an alluring manner giving new meaning to nondescript words.

The present collection of 167 pages contains 14 stories. However, the last appearing in the book cannot be regarded to be a story. Given the heading, *Platform par kharra akaila admi*, it is a portrayal of truthful feelings. Standing alone on a railway platform, watching trains come and go, not knowing which one to board or which one would carry him away. Sailing in a collapsing boat these days, I can well understand his feelings at this stage of life.

The book, hardbound, has been tastefully produced by Claseek, the well known publishing house, and priced at Rs100.