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The wounded pen and spilled blood: 'Manto' by Nandita das-a montage of the man and the writer

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Abstract

A biopic is a cinematic attempt to present the life of a person on celluloid. Manto (2018) by Nandita Das is an innovative attempt to capture the essence of Saadat Hasan Manto. The movie is a brilliant overlapping of life story of Manto and his stories adapted for the screen. Nandita tries to come up with something innovative by intertwining the biography of Manto and his radical stories in such a way that it is not known from where the story is started and where the film is finished. The life of Manto serves as a critical example of tortured artistic soul which tries to write about the downtrodden and marginal sections of the humanity with bare honesty. This perspective makes his stories audacious and too bold for a crumbling society to accept. While the movie brushes up his life sketch, it also adapts some of his iconic stories side by side to bring both the man and the writer side by side. The result is a maverick masterpiece that stands out for its innovation, daring and sensitivity.

Keywords: Manto, partition, woman, unconventional, taboo

Introduction

Representing a life story and witnessing the non-fictional elements, a biopic is made to highlight the known and unknown facts of a person's life. The known things and facts are already explored but when one looks at the unknown and hidden facts which sit behind the veil and mock grinningly, our monster of curiosity wants to tear the veil and expose the hidden. This Monster of curiosity sits on the seats to watch the drama, twists and ups and downs of lives portrayed on the screen. Sometimes, the center stage is taken by a cause célèbre whose life and episodes are enough guarantee to stoke the widespread interest among the public. Saadat Hasan Manto, the iconoclast writer, whose works have been condemned and praised with equal gusto is a figure who has turned into a cult after his death. It is not only his acerbic jabs at the decadent pseudo values of the society but the rakish lifestyle he lived that became the fodder of many gossipmonger churning of journalism. But his writing is in the stark contrast to his controversial life. They reek of blood and bone and all that is ailing the society.

Now when a filmmaker decides to make a biopic on such a myriad personality, there are many challenges in front of him or her. Which pages of the life are to be included, what to be ignored, what to be interpreted and what is to be left for the viewers to decide. Manto (2018) by Nandita Das is an unapologetic and innovative attempt to capture both the essence of the man Manto was and the sap of his creative writing. Nandita, a trendsetter filmmaker, used an innovative way to narrate the stories of Manto by using the frame of biographic elements of Manto.

One of the outstanding features of the movie is the brilliant overlapping of life story of Manto and his stories adapted for the screen. It is done so seamlessly that one never knows when one switches from one side to the other. The paper will try to show the craft of Nandita Das Gupta as a maestro of film craft who crosses the traditional lines in trying to represent the life of Manto on the big Canvas and dramatized Manto's life in an innovative way by mixing the key incidents of his life with his stories.

Contrasting with usual biographies or biopics, this movie begins with narration of the famous story by Manto 'Ten Rupee Note'. We see a very young girl being pushed into prostitution by her family. Manto used the ten rupees note significantly. The ten rupees note which is returned by the girl represents the unspent virility of male ego.

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By showing the value of ten rupees note Manto wants to prick the bubble of male ego which is already burst by the vivacious and energetic girl. It is evident the innocent girl is ignorant of the quagmire she has been pushed into as she happily hops in the car arrived to take her to an aged customer. The final segment of the story suddenly takes the reader from the fictional world to the bedroom of Manto where Safia, wife of Manto completes the story by reciting the ending lines while Manto is doing domestic chores. The camera captures Manto signing his name at the end of the story while his wife comments upon the radical elements that make her afraid of the consequences. It underscores the rebellious spirit of Manto's stories which like his signature became his hallmark.

The next scene shows Manto at a film producer's office in Bombay haggling for proper remuneration of his writing. There is a reference to his ongoing court cases and his helplessness in accepting whatever he is offered for his writing. Further, Manto is seen with his circle of friends along with his wife. The whole circle feels uncomfortable by the crudeness of Manto's stories. We also witness another iconoclast writer, Ismat Chughtai, titillating Manto regarding his proclivity towards depiction of prostitutes which leads him to reveal how he spent many days in close quarters of these fallen women. His daily experience of watching their exploitation made him write about these unfortunate victims with such brute honesty.

We are seamlessly taken to another story 'Sau Watt Ka Bulb' which depicts the sorry state of a prostitute who is utterly devoid of sleep due to continuous engagement with customers. She is seen sleeping on a cot when her pimp wakes her and coerces her to go with another customer. Totally reluctant to go, she smashes the head of pimp and kills him and thereafter goes to sleep again as if nothing has happened.

Next, the camera again shifts from the depiction of the story to the real life of Manto. Manto is seen working on papers near the graves of his parents. It is visible that he has no faith in God because when his sister tells him to remember God, he says that he writes 786 before every story, then his sister says that you do this because of our mother's oath.

The story making skills of Manto is witnessed in a particular scene of a park where two lovers are talking to each other and Manto starts creating fantasies about them and tells his wife his fantasy related with both lovers. He also encourages his wife to create a story on those lovers by saying that anyone can create a story because everyone is a storyteller. They (Manto and his wife) begin to create a story about the couple turn by turn.

In the next scene when Manto, his wife and Ismat Chughtai are in a shop, Manto overhears the arguments of two shopkeeper. He finds that they are arguing about what they will do and where they will go after the partition of this country. These two Muslim men are arguing; one refuses to leave Hindustan while other strongly believes that Hindustan is the country of Hindus and they, being Muslims would be killed in this country after partition. The shutter of the shop is closed by one of those two shopkeepers. Immediately, everyone witnesses the reason behind these arguments as they listen to the increasing uproar outside "Hindu, Hindu, Hindustan we will kill all the Muslims." Manto is sad and shocked by these nonsensical actions which are the consequences of communal altercations.

After reaching home, Manto and his wife Safia witness the celebration of India's freedom through their house windows proudly because they feel that this is a great victory in the history of this country and it is a proud moment for them too. Next, in a party scene Ismat Chughtai informs that people sent her many letters asking her to leave India and go to Pakistan. Pointing to this, she says that after partition, the Hindus of India want all the Muslims to go to Pakistan. She also informs that people are talking about how Bombay Talkies has become an 'adda' of Muslims.

Observing the hatred of Hindu and Muslim, the fear associated with the communal violence starts dominating his mind. When he sees a normal crowded place, he feels it as a risky place. In a particular scene, when he discusses his fear with his wife, he says that one has to keep two caps, one Hindu cap and the other a Muslim cap in this dire situation. He claims that when religion leaps from the heart to the head, one needs to wear caps.

When the friend of Manto, Shyam loses his family because of the Muslim mob, he tells Manto that Muslims are blood-thirsty. Manto says that "I am also a Muslim; it means you will also kill me if needed". Shyam replies that he will definitely kill him too. When they both travelling in a train this incident happens. This incident strikes the mind of Manto. He makes his mind to leave for Pakistan; the Mulk of Muslims as people call it. Shyam continuously tries to stop him by giving many excuses. Pointing to the bottle of wine, Shyam would say "You are barely a Muslim." But Manto gravely replies that he is enough Muslim to be killed. Shyam realizes his mistake and starts regretting. Leaving India, Manto observes that he is one among those thousands of people who has to leave their homes and go to other places involuntarily. Communal disputes forced people to take their families safely and go to other countries where they would get security. People are in dilemma in which country should they go to? Where is their home? Will they find something better elsewhere?

Manto, after reaching Pakistan, starts his journey as a Pakistani Muslim. While passing through the streets there, he perceives the dire destruction in Pakistan where everything is lying down pathetically. After the devastation caused by Dharam, people are picking up the remaining remainders. It is a heart wrenching picture for him. Manto hears about Mahatma Gandhi's murder at a shop where he is buying something to eat. One Muslim man informs other that Gandhi is killed by a Hindu mercilessly. Further, Manto meets the homeless people who were erstwhile the citizen of India.

Now, the scene shifts to the famous controversial story of Manto 'khol do' in which a father is hopefully looking for his young daughter. By asking everyone for his daughter; Sakina, he is looking everywhere but no one knows about her. He searches her everywhere in the crowd of the Refugee camp. Losing his hope completely, one day suddenly he goes to a hospital where he finds a girl lying on the stretcher. He identifies her as Sakina. The doctor asks her father to open the window, hearing the opening of the door she starts to untie the cord of her salwar. The hand movements of Sakina are indicating what may be the reason behind her condition. Being a victim of rape, this girl is a human being first, not a Muslim or a Hindu. Manto highlights that the violence affects neither Muslim nor Hindu it affects human beings neither Hindustani nor Pakistani.

Again, as the camera shifts from the story to the biopic, Manto can be seen in an office of a magazine publishing company reciting the ending line of the story. Nadeem, the magazine owner assures Manto that he would publish the story 'khol do' but refuses to publish another story, 'Thanda Ghost' because of its controversy creating content. Manto encounters many problems along with these Hindu Muslim tussles; he faces many family problems. Observing the failure of his writing because of the controversial nature, everyone asks him to look for a job. But putting his writing above all things, he refuses to take up any other job. "I will write enough that you will not die of Hunger" by replying this he wants to stop this topic but his wife Safia retorts that they will have to starve because of his writing.

People don't understand the value of Manto's writing, this is a crux issue for him. He always raises his voice for the value which he deserves. He is pushed on the path of evil by all these issues and things. He is standing like an alone island surrounded by the wide water, no path to escape. He is encroached by this water (problems) gradually. He starts drinking heavily.

Manto's stories were frequently accused with charges of obscenity. Regarding these charges, police search everything related with these stories in his house. When Manto is asked about his writing, he replies that his everything is left behind there in Bombay. 'Thanda Ghost' is charged with obscenity in court. In the mid of the court scene, the film again captures the site of famous story. This time it is the turn of Thanda Ghost. By the medium of this story, Manto again highlights the plight of women how they suffer in at different times in different situations. In this particular story Kulwant Kaur tries to know the cause behind Ishar Singh's withering condition. She tries every move to persuade him to make sexual union with her but Ishar Singh always becomes impotent before her. This thing makes her suspect that there must be a woman behind his condition. At last, she slits his throat with a dagger. Feeling the deep pain, he starts telling her what has happened to him. Once he looted a house where seven members lived. Six were killed by him. The last one was a beautiful girl. He carried her on his shoulder and further laid her on the grass behind the bushes. He tried to rape her but she was already dead...a corpse...'bilkul thanda ghost'. This story depicts the cruelties of communal conflicts and violence.

As Ismat Chughtai mentioned in her memoir about Manto

"His (Manto's) stories unsettle us because they take us to the darker, brutal corners of our psyche, to desires repressed and ugliness that settles".

Exploring the partition experiences, the stories of Manto exposes the grim realities of the contemporary time of Manto. The stories of Manto and the biographical elements are entangled so seamlessly that no one can separate them. In the next scene of the movie, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, the famous Urdu poet and writer, favors his writing especially, 'Thanda Ghost', which became the cause of another court case for Manto. Being a witness, he informs the court that the stories of Manto are not obscene.

The mental condition of Manto is getting worse day by day. The hallucination related with Bombay city and his friends begins to haunt him. He meets Shyam after so many years in Lahore during a film screening. Discussing many past memories, Manto asks about the state of his Bombay city.

Shyam shows his resentment because Manto never replies any letter.

Manto highlights the fact in the court that he writes what he knows and listens, being a social person. "My stories, according to me, are the mirrors for the society which try to reflect the grim reality of society."

The responsibility of family, poverty, his habit of drinking and his physical or mental state all these things attack him all together. He tries hard to face all the problems. The last few scenes are set on the famous story of Manto 'Toba Tek Singh' that dramatizes some lunatics who are seen affected by the partition as they are being deported from this country to India. Governments of India and Pakistan are sending all the lunatics to their respected country. Those who are Hindus are being sent to India and those who are Muslims are being sent to Pakistan. Manto is also there in this asylum where he has come to rid of his heavy drinking habit. Sitting in the yard of this asylum, Manto reads the news of Shyam's death. He is completely devastated.

Meanwhile one Sikh man requests to create a town for him, Toba Tek Singh so he can go there and live peacefully. The other Sikh replies that the government has not yet ordered it to be made. These lunatics are forcefully moved to India by the police. Desiring to go Toba Tek Singh land that Sikh asks the policeman whether Toba Tek Singh is in India. This 'Toba Tek Singh' is a symbolical land apart from the cruelties of communal violence of partition. In the final scene, the film depicts the confusing state of that Sikh who doesn't know actually where Toba Tek Singh town actually exists. At last, he cries, 'Pakistan! Hindustan! go to hell and falls there on the land which is neither of India nor of Pakistan'. With ending of Toba Tek Singh story, the film also ends here.

Manto narrates the last words of the film

"Oopad di gudgud di annexe di bedhyan di moong di dal" the original words of that Sikh.

So in this way Nandita has introduced the stories together with the biography of Manto. While doing this experiment Nandita has tried to mix fiction and reality so seamlessly. She tries to come up with something innovative by demonstrating these all together. These stories are intertwined in the biography of Manto in such a way that it is not known from where the story is started and where the film is finished.

The life of Manto is nothing less than a montage that serves as a window through which one can peep into the smithereens of his tormented soul. The soul which tries to empathize with the marginal, the outcast, the discarded and the exploited remains of the humanity and that too at the darkest hours in the history of Indian subcontinent. As such, his asanas are also similarly dark and repulsive but they are what they tell of about-the seamy side of humanity. The movie Manto by Nandita Das is an exemplary attempt to do justice to this maverick personality by bringing together the man and the writer together in an immaculate and consummate manner.

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