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Social Realism in the Works of Saadat Hasan Manto: An Analytical Study by Dr. K.K. Sharma, Newage College of Education ,Phinter, Bilawal, Kathua J& K

Abstract

Social realism is a significant literary approach that seeks to depict the actual conditions of society and the lived experiences of ordinary people **(Williams, *Marxism and Literature*)**. The writings of Saadat Hasan Manto stand among the most compelling representations of social realism in Urdu literature (Jalal; Flemming). His short stories present the stark and often uncomfortable realities of human life, including poverty, violence, prostitution, and the psychological scars caused by the Partition of India **(Jalal; Bhalla)**. Through his bold and unfiltered narratives, Manto reveals the hypocrisy, injustice, and moral contradictions embedded within society. His characters frequently come from marginalized sections such as refugees, laborers, and socially oppressed women, whose experiences reflect broader societal conditions. Stories like *Toba Tek Singh*, *Khol Do*, and *Thanda Gosht* demonstrate the devastating consequences of communal violence and human suffering during times of crisis **(Manto, *Toba Tek Singh and Other Stories*)**. This study explores the key elements of social realism in Manto's writings and evaluates how his stories function as reflections of deeper social tensions and structures. It also examines his narrative methods, including concise language, psychological insight, and symbolic depth, which reinforce the realism of his work. The study concludes that Manto's literature not only records historical realities but also compels readers to engage critically with uncomfortable truths about society and human nature.

Keywords: Social Realism, Urdu Literature, Partition, Marginalization, Humanism, Society

1. Introduction

Social realism is a literary mode that focuses on portraying the real conditions of society, especially the lives of ordinary and marginalized individuals (Williams, *Marxism and Literature*; Lukács). It aims to represent social issues such as poverty, inequality, violence, and injustice without idealization or romantic distortion. Within Urdu literature, the works of Saadat Hasan Manto serve as one of the strongest embodiments of this tradition.

Manto was a fearless and influential short story writer whose work captured the harsh realities of the society in which he lived (Encyclopaedia Britannica; Flemming). Writing during the turbulent years surrounding the Partition of India, he witnessed widespread violence, displacement, and human suffering. These experiences significantly shaped his literary themes and became central to many of his stories. Rather than presenting idealized figures or moralistic lessons, Manto depicted flawed individuals dealing with complex social and psychological challenges.

A distinctive feature of Manto's writing is his focus on marginalized sections of society. His stories frequently center on prostitutes, refugees, laborers, and victims of communal violence—groups often neglected in mainstream narratives (Jalal 183–205). Through works such as *Toba Tek Singh*, *Khol Do*, and *Thanda Gosht*, he exposes the brutality, hypocrisy, and contradictions present in social structures.

Manto's style is marked by simplicity and intensity. His narratives are brief, direct, and emotionally powerful, compelling readers to confront uncomfortable aspects of human behavior and social systems. Although his writings were often criticized as obscene(Manto, *Toba Tek Singh and Other Stories*), Manto defended himself by asserting that he merely portrayed reality as it existed (Hasan xv–xx) Therefore, examining social realism in Manto's work is essential for understanding both his literary significance and the social and historical

realities reflected in his stories. His writings not only document a critical period in South Asian history but also provoke reflection on issues of morality, humanity, and social justice.

2. Concept of Social Realism in Literature

Social realism is a literary perspective that seeks to represent society in its true form by focusing on the everyday experiences and struggles of ordinary people. Instead of presenting an idealized version of reality, it highlights the difficulties faced by individuals, particularly those belonging to disadvantaged groups. This approach developed as writers attempted to expose social inequalities and draw attention to issues arising from economic, political, and cultural systems(Williams, *Marxism and Literature*; Lukács)..

In literary works, social realism addresses themes such as poverty, class conflict, injustice, exploitation, and human suffering(Williams, *Keywords*). Writers adopting this approach aim to portray these realities honestly and critically, enabling readers to understand the conditions shaping people's lives. Thus, social realism functions not only as a narrative technique but also as a form of social critique that questions established norms and encourages awareness.

A defining characteristic of social realism is its emphasis on ordinary characters rather than heroic or idealized figures. The narratives often revolve around workers, refugees, and socially oppressed individuals whose voices are rarely represented. Through such portrayals, writers reveal the relationship between individuals and the society they inhabit Another essential feature is authenticity. Writers employ simple language, realistic settings, and believable characters to create narratives that resemble real-life situations. This approach helps readers connect emotionally with both the characters and the issues depicted.

In Urdu literature, social realism gained prominence during the early and mid-twentieth century, a period marked by political upheaval and social transformation. Among the writers of this era, Saadat Hasan Manto stands out for his uncompromising depiction of reality(Rahman; King). His stories vividly capture the violence, moral contradictions, and psychological trauma associated with the Partition of India, demonstrating the power of literature to expose social truths and challenge societal conscience.

3.Literature Review

Existing scholarship on Saadat Hasan Manto emphasizes his major contribution to portraying social realities and human suffering in Urdu fiction. Researchers have analyzed his work from multiple perspectives, including realism, humanism, sociology, and historical context, to understand how his writings reflect the conditions of his time.

According to Encyclopaedia Britannica (Encyclopaedia Britannica), Manto is regarded as one of the most influential Urdu short story writers, recognized for his fearless depiction of reality and his focus on marginalized individuals. His stories explore themes such as poverty, violence, sexuality, and the psychological consequences of Partition, often challenging conventional moral values.

Jalal (*The Pity of Partition*), presents a detailed account of Manto's life and work, arguing that his writings are deeply connected to the historical context of Partition and its aftermath. She highlights how his stories portray the psychological trauma and human tragedy experienced during this period.

Flemming (*Another Lonely Voice*), examines Manto's thematic concerns and literary style, emphasizing his focus on marginalized characters and

his ability to depict them with empathy and psychological depth (Ahmed (2020).

Recent studies, such as Maroof (2024), analyze thematic elements in Manto's stories and suggest that his works reflect broader social and cultural realities while exposing hypocrisy and moral contradictions. Similarly, Sadia and Kaosar (2025) argue that Manto's narratives highlight human dignity despite oppression and encourage empathy for marginalized groups.

Novroz and Mangi (2025) provide a sociological perspective, concluding that Manto's fiction reveals underlying social structures and tensions that shape human behavior.

4.Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine the elements of social realism in the works of Saadat Hasan Manto and to understand how his short stories reflect the social realities of his time. The study aims to analyze the themes, characters, and narrative techniques used by Manto to portray issues such as social injustice, human suffering, and moral contradictions in society.

The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

1. **To analyze the concept of social realism** in Urdu literature and its significance in literary studies.
2. **To examine the portrayal of marginalized individuals** such as refugees, women, and the poor in the short stories of Saadat Hasan Manto.
3. **To explore the representation of social problems** including violence, exploitation, and inequality in Manto's works.
4. **To study the impact of historical events**, particularly the Partition of India, on the themes and narratives of Manto's short stories.
5. **To evaluate the literary style and narrative techniques** used by Manto in presenting social realities.
6. **To understand the social and psychological dimensions** reflected in Manto's portrayal of human behavior and relationships.

Overall, these objectives aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Saadat Hasan Manto used literature as a medium to depict the complexities of society and highlight the struggles of ordinary people.

5.Importance of the Study

The study of social realism in the works of Saadat Hasan Manto is important for understanding the relationship between literature and society. Manto's writings present a truthful depiction of social realities and reveal the struggles faced by ordinary people. By analyzing his stories, this study helps highlight how literature can serve as a powerful medium for reflecting social conditions and raising awareness about issues such as injustice, inequality, and human suffering(Williams, *Marxism and Literature*).

Another important aspect of this study is its contribution to the understanding of historical and social contexts reflected in Urdu literature. Manto's works were deeply influenced by the tragic events of the Partition of India, which caused widespread violence, displacement, and psychological trauma. Examining his stories allows researchers to better understand how literature documents and interprets major historical events and their impact on human lives(Bhalla; Jalal).

This study is also significant because it focuses on the representation of marginalized individuals in Manto's stories. His characters often include refugees, laborers, and socially oppressed women whose experiences are rarely highlighted in mainstream narratives. By studying these portrayals, the research emphasizes the importance of empathy, human dignity, and social justice in literary works(Flemming).

Furthermore, the study contributes to literary scholarship by analyzing Manto's narrative style and literary techniques. His use of simple language, realistic dialogue, and psychological depth has made his stories influential in Urdu literature. Understanding these techniques can help students and scholars appreciate the artistic value of his writing and its lasting impact on modern literature(Hasan).

Overall, this research is important because it not only explores the literary significance of Manto's works but also demonstrates how literature can reveal the complex realities of society and encourage critical reflection on human behavior and social structures.

6. Social Realism in Manto's Short Stories

The short stories of Saadat Hasan Manto are widely recognized for their powerful portrayal of social realities. His writings reflect the complexities of human life and reveal the unforgiving conditions faced by individuals in society. Through his stories, Manto presented a truthful picture of social injustice, human suffering, and moral contradictions without attempting to soften or idealize these realities. His narratives often focus on ordinary people who struggle with poverty, discrimination, and social neglect(Ahmed; Khan).

6.1 Representation of Marginalized People

One of the most significant aspects of social realism in Manto's works is his focus on marginalized groups. His stories frequently highlight the lives of individuals who exist on the fringes of society, such as prostitutes, laborers, and refugees. Instead of portraying them as immoral or inferior, Manto presents them as complex human beings shaped by their social circumstances. By doing so, he challenges the moral judgments of society and encourages readers to understand the struggles faced by these individuals(Flemming; Hasan).

6.2 Depiction of Partition Trauma

The tragic events of the Partition of India deeply influenced Manto's writing. Many of his stories depict the violence, chaos, and psychological trauma experienced by people during this period. In stories such as *Toba Tek Singh*, *Khol Do*, and *Thanda Gosht*, Manto illustrates how communal conflict and political decisions affected ordinary lives(Manto, *Toba Tek Singh and Other Stories*; Bhalla; Jalal). These narratives highlight the loss of humanity and the breakdown of moral values during times of social and political upheaval.

6.3 Exposure of Social Hypocrisy

Another important element of social realism in Manto's stories is his exposure of social hypocrisy. He often reveals the contradictions between societal values and actual human behavior. For example, while society publicly condemns prostitution and immorality, it often silently supports or benefits from them. Manto's stories force readers to confront these contradictions and question the moral standards imposed (Khan; Maroof).

6.4 Psychological Depth and Human Suffering

Manto's social realism is not limited to external social conditions; it also explores the psychological experiences of his characters. His characters often suffer from trauma, guilt, fear, and emotional conflict. By presenting these psychological dimensions, Manto shows how social realities deeply affect the human mind. This psychological realism adds depth to his narratives and makes his stories emotionally powerful(Flemming; Sadia and Kaosar).

Overall, the short stories of Saadat Hasan Manto serve as a reflects underlying social structures and tensions. Through his honest and fearless storytelling, he exposes the hidden truths of social life and highlights the struggles of those who are often ignored or silenced.

7. Literary Style and Narrative Technique

The literary style and narrative techniques of Saadat Hasan Manto play a significant role in strengthening the realism and emotional power of his stories. Manto's writing is known for its simplicity, clarity, and directness. Unlike many writers who use elaborate language and complex descriptions, Manto preferred straightforward expression that allowed the reality of the situation to speak for itself. His simple yet powerful language makes his stories accessible while intensifying their emotional impact(Flemming).

One of the most distinctive features of Manto's narrative technique is brevity. Most of his short stories are concise and focused, yet they convey deep social and psychological meanings. Through a few carefully chosen words and situations, Manto is able to reveal complex human emotions and social conflicts. This economy of language gives his stories a sharp and striking effect on readers(Hasan).

Another important aspect of Manto's storytelling is his use of realistic dialogue. The conversations between characters often reflect the natural speech patterns of ordinary people. This authenticity helps create a sense of realism and allows readers to connect more closely with the characters and their experiences.

Manto also frequently employs unexpected or shocking endings. These endings are not merely meant to surprise readers but to emphasize the ruthless truths of society. By presenting sudden and powerful conclusions, he forces readers to reflect deeply on the moral and social issues raised in the story.

Furthermore, Manto's narratives often contain strong psychological insights. He carefully portrays the inner thoughts, fears, and emotions of his characters, revealing how social circumstances shape human behavior. This psychological realism enhances the depth of his storytelling and highlights the complexity of human nature(Jalal).

Overall, Manto's literary style combines simplicity, realism, and psychological depth. These narrative techniques allow him to present social realities in a powerful and unforgettable manner, making his stories an important contribution to modern Urdu literature.

8. Criticism and Controversy

Despite his significant contribution to Urdu literature, the works of Saadat Hasan Manto were often surrounded by criticism and controversy. Many critics and conservative sections of society accused him of writing obscene and morally disturbing stories. His bold portrayal of sensitive subjects such as sexuality, prostitution, violence, and human cruelty led to several legal cases being filed against him for alleged obscenity(Jalal).

During his lifetime, Manto faced multiple trials both in British India and later in Pakistan. Stories such as *Thanda Gosht*, *Bu*, and *Kali Shalwar* were particularly criticized for their explicit themes(Hasan). Critics argued that these stories violated social morality and cultural values. However, Manto strongly defended his writing, claiming that he merely portrayed the reality of society rather than creating obscenity.

Manto believed that if his stories appeared shocking or disturbing, it was because society itself contained those disturbing realities. According to him, literature should reflect truth, even when that truth is uncomfortable. He famously stated that if people could not tolerate his

stories, it meant that the times they lived in were themselves intolerable(Jalal 271).

Another reason for controversy was Manto's fearless depiction of the brutality and violence that occurred during the Partition of India. His stories openly addressed the horrors experienced by both Hindus and Muslims, which sometimes made him a target of criticism from different communities. By refusing to take sides and focusing instead on human suffering, Manto challenged communal narratives and emphasized the shared tragedy of the period.

Although he faced ruthless criticism during his lifetime, Manto's work later gained widespread recognition and appreciation. Today, he is regarded as one of the most important writers in Urdu literature, celebrated for his honesty, courage, and commitment to portraying social reality without compromise(Encyclopaedia Britannica).

9 Conclusion

The works of Saadat Hasan Manto represent one of the most powerful expressions of social realism in Urdu literature. Through his bold and uncompromising storytelling, Manto portrayed the callous realities of society and highlighted the struggles of marginalized individuals. His stories provide a vivid depiction of human suffering, social injustice, and moral contradictions that exist within society(Ahmed; Flemming).

Manto's writings were deeply influenced by the tragic events of the Partition of India, which caused immense violence, displacement, and psychological trauma. By focusing on the experiences of ordinary people during this period, he revealed the human cost of political and communal conflicts. His stories demonstrate how social conditions shape human behavior and expose the fragile nature of moral values during times of crisis(Jalal; Bhalla).

Another important aspect of Manto's contribution is his fearless approach to sensitive and controversial subjects. Despite facing criticism and accusations of obscenity, he remained committed to presenting the truth as he saw it. His literary style, characterized by simplicity, realism, and psychological depth, allowed him to convey complex social realities in a powerful and memorable way(Hasan).

In conclusion, Manto's works serve not only as literary masterpieces but also as important social documents that reflect the realities of their time. His stories continue to remain relevant because they address universal themes such as humanity, injustice, and moral hypocrisy. Through social realism, Manto challenged readers to confront uncomfortable truths and encouraged deeper reflection on the nature of society and human behavior(Williams, *Marxism and Literature*).

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