

The Poetic Tone of a Storyteller: A Comparative Study between Some of Saadat Hasan Manto and Bonoful's Short Stories

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Abstract

Bolai Chand Mukhopadhyay was, a major literary figure in twentieth-century Bengali literature and Saadat Hasan Manto is largely known for his stories in the Urdu language on the Partition of India and Pakistan. These two writers are from different languages but have similar social and political situations. Though their language was different but there are some similar aspects in their writing that brings them closer as a writer. This study aims to analyze their style as a writer of short stories, find out the thematic similarities with the example of some of their short stories and above all, this study will try to prove that their outlook regarding society, human life and philosophy of life is quite similar and those similarities of perspective worked like a common cord in their writing. Another main aspect of their writing is, though they are storytellers but sometimes the uniqueness of their writing style, creates a poetic effect in their short stories. This study will investigate those poetic aspects of their writing.

Keywords

Manto and Bonoful as a writer, writing style, character, use of symbol, Poetic quality.

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Introduction

In his original epitaph Saadat Hasn Manto(1912-1955) had these words engraved:” In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful, here lies Saadat Hassan Manto and with him lie buried all the secrets of the art of storytelling in his breast. Weighed down by the earth he wonders still: Who is the greater writer, God or he?”(Asad ,n.p). Sarmad Sehbai , in his article in *The Herald* argued that ‘Saadat Hasan Manto, a red rag to both conservative and progressive writers, was feared by the reactionary press, the state and the literary mafias of his times. All his life he fought the bigoted social reformers, ideologues and religious fanatics, facing various court trials with a heroic smile. ’ This statement reveals that, in his personal life, Manto had his struggle. He had to stand against conventional society with boldness as a human being and at the same time as a writer.

On the other hand, Bolai Chand Mukhopadhyay (1899-1979) in his book ‘Golpo samagra (collection of short stories)’ wrote in the preface, ‘আমার গল্প যাঁহারা ভালোবাসেন তাহাদের কাছে আমার লেখা সমন্ধে ভূমিকা নিষ্প্রয়োজন। যাঁহারা ভালবাসেন না তাহাদের কাছে আরো নিষ্প্রয়োজন। যাঁহারা আমার লেখার সহিত পরিচিত নহেন তাহারা গল্পগুলি পড়িলেই আমার স্বরূপ জানিতে পারিবেন’. That means ‘It is unnecessary to write anything about my writing for those, who likes my story. And it’s more unnecessary for those who doesn’t like my story at all. Those who are not familiar with my writing, will know about it after reading my stories.’(Translated by the author)

The story of taking the pen name Bonophul (meaning "The wild flower"), will reveal another dimension of this person, Bolai Chand Mukhopadhyay. It seems that the name ‘wild flower’ is a reflection of his own stubborn, wild and free personality. When he was a student in high school, he wrote poems in local newspapers and everyone was happy with his identity as a writer except one person, his teacher. The headmaster of his school thought that Bolai Chand can get more marks if he abandons writing poems. So the teacher ordered him, not to write poems anymore. But little Bolai Chand was unstoppable, he continued his writing using the pen name as ‘wild flower’ and from there, started the journey of a tremendous writer. Without this kind of wild and bold nature, maybe we

could not get a profound writer like him. Later on, he became a doctor and maybe this profession also helped him to look at the core of common people's life and to see the reality of life and society.

The following description of these two people was necessary to reveal their thinking process and to understand them as a person beyond the identity of a writer. Gradually, this article will also reveal these writers as skilled artists of contemporary society, almost like a poet. As a writer, Bonoful and Saadat Hasn Manto carry quite similar styles and intentions regarding their writing.

Bonoful and Manto were quite aware of the power and intention of their writing. Their tone and way of expression are also very close to each other. Both of them used innocent, satirical, and yet very bold tones to express their thought as a writer. And this specific way of expressing something is one of the main aspects of Manto and Bonoful's writing. Both writers have faced changing conditions in the social and cultural state. Indian sub-continent was searching for its cultural identity through a long, tough and painful social and psychological journey. With their short stories, Sadat Hasa Manto and Bolai Chand Mukhopadhyay were able to portray the psychology and emotion of the common people and the universality of hypocritical human behavior.

Critical Discussion:

Sarmad Sehbai, in his article on *The Herald* said, 'His characters were not the mouthpieces of ready-made truths who would sermonize from a pulpit as saviours; neither *Noori na Naari*, neither angelic nor satanic, Manto's Adam was born out of mud.' Manto is the author who is equally inspirational and controversial. His struggle as a writer and as a human being made him an inspirational person, and his being truthful while showing the picture of society and the hypocritical nature of human being, made him controversial person. But apart from being inspirational and controversial, he showed his exceptional and bold color as a writer by choosing his characters from ordinary and root level people. And in this journey we can also mention the name of famous Bengali writer Bonoful. Both of them were against the conventional and hypocritical nature of the society and they choose their hero from someone who comes from a cruel and real world, rather than from an ideal world. Their writing was the metaphor of the contemporary society.

Nandita Das, an Indian actress and director of the movie *Manto*(2018), responding to a question on why she chose Manto for her next directorial venture, said ' He wrote with a rare sensitivity and empathy for his characters.'" (Pooja,n.p). She also said in another interview 'our identities are far too often linked to caste, class, nationality and religion, as opposed to the universality of human experience. Manto's works held up a mirror to the society of his time that showed its fears, contradictions and prejudices and the reflection has not changed much today.' (Thakur, n.p)

This two statement about Manto that, he carries a rare empathy for his characters and his work is very much relevant for today's world, is also, applicable for the Bengali writer Bonoful . Bonoful's writing is also reflective of the contemporary society and the contradictions of that society. Both of them was also quite responsible as critique of the society.

Muqbil Ahmar in his article, 'Walking with the marginalized' on *The Hindu* (The daily newspaper) wrote 'Manto was a fearless champion of the truth and was disdainful of any kind of hypocrisy. Manto's characters are prostitutes and pimps, writers, even

madmen. They are often nameless people whose human essence and relentless quest for identity and dignity he sought to explore.'

It's true that, Manto's characters are often nameless people and this namelessness creates a new identity of that particular character. Interestingly, Bonoful also took his characters from ordinary people like prostitute, day labor, milkman, beggar etc. The quest for name, identity and dignity gives those characters a voice. Reader can hear the voice but actually those voices are horribly silent. And here appears the magical poet like writer Manto and Bonoful, who were able to turn the horrible silence into a loud scream through their calculative but sharp words.

Barnali Talukder in her article 'Revisiting Banaphol's Stories' on The Daily Star, wrote 'No life can simply be subsumed under a single category- nor is it possible to come up with a single term to define life's fluxes or flavors. One particular moment might sometimes outshine decades. Similarly, the experience of decades often can divulge the unavoidable truths of human life. The writer Banaphool, comes up with such truths through the twists and turns of his stories'.

In his stories, Bonoful creates a provocative environment that acts like a base of the story. And from that part gradually he takes the reader towards an unavoidable truth and turning point of human life. Here lies the difference and resemblance of Manto and Bonoful's writing. Where Bonoful creates a base to go towards the twist of the story, Manto sometimes directly portrays the climax of the story. But both of their stories contain a turning point or sparkling spot.

Style of Manto:

Siyah Haashiye (Black Border) is one of the most interesting collections of short stories of Manto. He used just two or four lines, for some of his stories. From those few lines emerges a strong untold story. In his story doya (Kindness) he wrote just two lines. The story is

'Please don't kill my young daughter in front of my eyes.

Ok. Listen to him. Take the girl somewhere else.'

(Translated by the author)

Here we will find Manto the storyteller. In this story there is an invisible question mark after the title and after finishing the story, reader realizes that the word 'kindness' actually carries the opposite meaning. The definition of the very word 'Mercy or kindness' has been changed and this kindness is nothing else but a mere brutality. Here lies the iconoclastic style of storytelling of Manto.

First noticeable fact in this story is, there is no reaction or description of emotional fact from the part of the writer. But as a reader we can imagine the situation and at the same time a huge wave of emotion goes through the reader's mind. The reader can feel the traumatic situation of that girl, the pain of that father, Extreme anger for that murderer or maybe the rapist and finally as a reader we feel that the situation is very much real and genuine reflection of our own society. But all these emotions were created by the words. So as a writer, he was totally aware about the emotional journey that a reader is going to embrace after reading this two line's story.

This kind of emotional journey after reading a few lines, makes the story more expressive than any other long narrated story and Manto an extra ordinary storyteller. That means like an ice- burg, the main part of the story lies beneath that two line and like a magician or poet, Manto tells the real story without telling anything.

Another characteristics of Manto's style is, some of his characters are silent and questing for their identity and dignity. Here the only female character whose name has not been mentioned in the story and the readers are not quite eager to know the name actually. This character is only a female and her female body is her only identity. There is no reaction from the girl but as a reader we can hear the silent scream of that girl, and that scream is also the scream for humanity, justice and dignity. Here the writer acts as a poet because he didn't wrote a single line that shows the pain of that girl. But reader can feel the pain and hear the scream. Her silent scream is a claim for dignity as human being and a vain attempt to shake the dead body of humanity.

Another short story is 'Rest':

' Hay, He is not dead yet! Still alive!

Brother, Let it befeeling very tired!''

(Translated by the author)

This story is like a slap on the face of the very word 'humanity'. Manto had once said, 'Why would I undress a society that is already naked? It is true I make no attempt to cover it, but that's not my job...my job is to write with a white chalk so that I can draw attention to the blackness of the board'. Manto wrote as he saw, as he felt, without any dilution.

And again in this story also, the title carries a question mark with it, an invisible question mark actually. Here the reader can feel the presence of, at least three person. The killer, the friend and the victim. But the most interesting fact is, the writer is also present as an observer of that brutal situation. And the reader also plays the same part as the writer. And the way it was told, somewhere makes the reader mentally paralyzed. This is another most important style of Manto (Bonoful also) that he can make the reader mentally involved into the story, no matter how long the story is.

Reader realizes that, the three character of the story is the part of their society, and the society is a reflection of their own self. And above all, as a person, sharing the same society with this kind of human beings, it's possible that they also somewhere nourish this kind of barbaric nature in their own self. It's like looking our own ugly face in the mirror and being ashamed for our own self. We cannot deny to see our ugly face.

In this story, the silent character (the person who is losing his life) is a symbolic representation of our dumb society and human beings. There is no response from that person, as if he is not a human at all but a puppet. His silence carries a vital question, and that question is, those who are killing the person, are they human or animal? This particular feeling of being bound and inhuman nature of human being, throws the reader into total despair.

Style of Bonoful:

One of the most interesting story written by Bonoful is 'neem gach'(a tree of Neem) .The story starts with a description of a useful tree, called Neem. Each and every person takes their needed parts from the tree. The leaf is useful for skin diseases, the branches are useful for teeth, Ayurvedic practitioner uses the bark to make medicine, and they use the leaf for cooking also. People say that the air passes through the tree is good for health, so they allowed the tree to spread its root. But the pathetic thing is that, they don't think about the nourishment of that helpful tree. It is there, naturally growing towards the sky, it cannot move or change its place and the place is full of filthy things.

Suddenly, one day a stranger came there .He was astonished by the beauty of the tree .And he was the only person who was not thinking to use any part of the tree. He thought, how beautiful the tree is! The flower of the tree was like sparkling stardust to him. After some time he disappeared. The Author tells us that, the way he was looking at the tree, reveals that he is a poet. And the description was like,

‘‘খানিক্ষন চেয়ে থেকে চলে গেল’
কবিরাজ নয় ,কবি।’’

‘After looking at the tree for sometime, He was gone
He is not an ayurvedic practitioner but a poet’
(Translated by the author)

Most amazing thing is ,it is not possible to translate the second line ,in english language. To understand the beauty of that line ,one must know bengali language and culture.Bonoful used begali words to create a poetic tone . From now on, the twist starts. The tree was really eager to go with the strange guy, but naturally it was not possible. Its root was too deep and supposed to stand there till death.

The real twist comes when the author brings another character, and uses just one line to describe that character. This is the part where we find the skill and strength of the author as a storyteller.

And the line is,

‘‘ওদের বাড়ির গৃহকর্ম-নিপুণা লক্ষ্মী বউটার ঠিক এক দশা।’’

‘ The condition of the bride of this house, is same as the tree .’
(Translated by the author)

We realize that the tree is not only a character but also a symbol of a village girl who has lost her freedom after getting married in that house, where the tree is growing. His use of symbol and his writing style is quite unique. The author makes the reader feel sympathy about the poor condition of the tree. It helps all the people with its most possible way, but those who takes advantage of that tree never thought about the poor condition or the painful situation of the tree, as the tree is unable to complain with its own voice. The situation of the married girl is same. As if they are mirror image of one another.

This story reveals some quality or characteristics of Bonoful as a storyteller. Firstly, he creates a base of the story that directs the mind of a reader in a particular way. Makes the reader think about a side of a story, but actually the main story is hidden by that surface level story. He uses some symbolic fact to give hint of the real story behind the

shadow of the story. Interesting fact is, the real story (the story of the bride) is totally untold. And this symbolic presentation of character and dramatic turn in the situation, gives the story a poem like essence.

In the last line of this story, Bonoful brings a character and this character is totally silent. Readers realize her presence in the last line and after revealing her identity, they visualize a new dimension of the story of a Neem tree. Last line of the story is the turning point and this line creates a psychological effect on the mind of a reader. This last line, makes Bonoful the poet of storytelling.

Like a poet or a painter, both Manto and Bonoful can create an emotion through their words and one of the main aspects of 'poem' is, it provokes a thought and triggers a particular emotion. The Poem makes us feel a particular emotion that we can't express through words. This short story contains the same quality of a poem. The beauty of the story is its simplicity. The story is simple, yet it carries a deeper thought. It is a story about a tree or we should say, it's a story about a common village girl or it is the story of every human being!

The use of symbol is very strong in this story. At the same time the Neem tree is the symbolic representation of every ordinary human being and a woman. If we think the story in a universal level then we will find out that every human being feels the same as the tree, somewhere in their life. They feel that the worldly affairs are like the root of the tree and those roots making them unmovable, taking their freedom day by day. Like the tree, they are also feeling the eternal tiredness of repetitive life. This tiredness and chained situation reminds us, modern poet Robert Frost's poem.

'But I've promises to keep
And miles to go before I sleep'.....

Another story which can explain Bonoful as a poetic writer, and the story is 'hasir golpo (A funny story)'. Here we find a scenario of a family where extreme poverty has badly affected their life. Harihara babu is the one and only earning person of his family. Rest of the members of the family is his wife, daughter, son, and a servant. Their physical description indicates that, all of them are malnourished, the daughter of Harihara babu is severely sick and bedridden. The bitter experiences of life made them irritating human beings for each other.

The turning part of the story is the last para, where Harihara babu is trying to concentrate on writing a story. He is trying to ignore his depressed wife, his crying son and his severely sick daughter who is suffering in high fever and vomiting. Apart from all these things, Hariharan babu himself is also having some health issues. The chair and table, where he is trying to write a story is also full of bed bugs.

And the main irony of the story is our protagonist is trying to control his headache by holding his head with one hand and trying to write a funny story for the editor of a newspaper. Because to earn money he is needed to write a funny story because, people like that kind of stories written by him.

Again the title of the story is something indicative and carries a twisted meaning of the title. The title itself is a source of irony and pathetically funny. Symbolic use of situation and material things makes the story more metaphorical. The poor condition of their health, the rotten furniture of the house and most importantly the presence of bedbug in the

chair and table is very symbolic and carries dual meaning. Even a small bug is also indicative of the problem and hard situation of life.

But overall, the story is a simple and real description of life. Simplicity is the power of this story yet the thought is deep. And the irony narrated in the last para is also a part of reality. From this point of view, like the title, the story is really an ironical representation of life.

Similarities of Manto and Bonoful:

Previously this article showed that one of the main style of Banoful is, creating a striking effect through the last line of the story. Where some of Manto's fiction just tells the main or punch line and without using much word, directly reflects the twist of the story.

Manto's Style is sharper, like an axe, which creates an impact so deep (with a brutal honesty) and Bonoful also creates an impact on the readers mind but his way or rather we should say his weapon is not as sharp and direct as Manto. But the final impact is quite similar. The audience get struck by their simple yet profound narratives.

Manto is largely known for his stories on the Partition .But both Manto and Bonoful shows empathy for marginalized people in there writing, and this is what makes them equally relevant today and from this point of view both of them are fellow traveler in the path of literature. They had the strength to be the voice of the voiceless. As a writer both Manto and Bonoful showed empathy for those who are on the periphery. Their characters are prostitutes and pimps, writers, day labor, milkman and even madmen and they are often nameless people. Both writer used their magical writing power to find identity and dignity for the voiceless people.

Another main aspect of their writing is, both Bonoful and Manto were creatively equipped to handle the striking effect of their story to raise a question on conventional thinking of the society. It is a way of questioning our own morality and righteousness. Their main intention behind writing was to make the society aware of the prevailing conditions through the different questions raised by them in their work. They wrote many stories which were close from the reality and have a deep impression in our hearts. And at the end, those stories shakes our consciousness.

Manto and bonoful have touched the very concept of hypocrisy of ethical thinking of the people of sub-continent. Where in a story Manto showed that, Hindu people killing pig in a mosque and Muslim people slaughtering cow in Mandir. Both of them are thinking that by hurting other people's religious emotion they are serving God and their religion. But actually by hurting others emotion, they are brutally killing their identity and that identity is humanity. Losing the humanity is the biggest sin and they have forgotten it.

Manto and Bonoful portrayed quite similar dilemma or mental pain of human being but from different area or point of view. Pain of losing one's own identity, pain of losing emotional bonding with home land ,the trauma of existential dislocation ,lack of Humanity, ethics, and lost ability to see the universality of human experience. All this things are quite visible in their writing.

Both writer tried to show that as a human being we are still grappling with issues of freedom, of expression and struggles of identity. Even today, our identities are linked to caste, class and religion but for both Manto and Bonoful, the only identity that matters, is being a human. Their silent characters show that human beings first identity should be, human being. It is their fearlessness and a deep concern for the human condition that they

have always felt most deeply connected to. No part of human existence remained untouched or taboo for them.

Their stories carries some universal aspects. This stories are applicable for all time and place, where humanity, sensitivity and justice are affected by so called society, religion and hypocrisy of educated persons.

Poetic quality of Manto and Bonoful:

One of the main quality of modern poetry is, its simplicity. Manto and Bonoful's short fiction is also very simple in the terms of narration. But like modern poem, they are simple yet deep. In their writing, two lair of the story is visible. There is an inner story, and that story was used to reveal the truth in the outer story.

In his epitaph he raised an ironical yet philosophical question, whether he or God, who is the better writer? This question raises another question in the mind of a reader and that question is, Manto thinks himself more powerful as a storyteller then the Creator? Conventional thinker will take his statement as an arrogant statement against God.

Like a philosopher, he throws a statement but his intention is to prove the opposite thing. For God, every human being is important and equal as they are His own creation. There is no discrimination in the eyes of God. Human creates discrimination for their own purpose but everyone is equal for God.

Manto and Bonoful were the writers who treated their characters with empathy and in a sensitive way. They treated them as human being. Here comes God and two writers in a parallel way. As God treats human beings with equality, they were also able to see their characters as human being, with equality. Maybe this is the reason that Manto asked the question, who is the most truthful storyteller, he or God?

This is also the quality of poet that they can be the voice of the voiceless, can say many thing without saying nothing. In Bonoful and Manto's fiction we see these qualities .Most of the untold stories, emotions and truths are revealed through silence in their stories. Sometimes silence can be the strongest scream and some vacuum can be full filled with golden silence. This two writer, like a poet, fulfilled the gap between "told" and "untold" through their bold and knife like words.

Conclusion:

The most unique part of the writing of Bonoful and Manto is, their exceptional way of expression and tremendous use of symbol. They have shown us that, how vividly life could be explained using a few words. If the style of expression is poetic and precise then it is possible to show the large dimension of life in a small space. As a reader, we read some stories and then forget them .But Manto and Bonoful makes the reader remember the impact of their stories. After finishing the story, something will remain forever in the readers mind and from this perspective they are poetic, magical and iconoclastic writer. Sometimes we search for a perfect word to express our emotion exactly and at the end we realize that, words or language is inadequate to express those emotion or thoughts. Both Manto and Bonoful as a writer was able to give a voice to those emotions and expressions but in a poetic way.

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