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Prophet or Renegade: An Assessment of Sa'adat Hasan Manto as a 'Progressive' Writer

Girija Suri

Abstract. This paper proposes to examine a variety of Manto's writings and his comments about the role and nature of art in society to arrive at an understanding of what it means to be a "progressive" (writer) in an overtly ideological and socially-committed literary movement. It attempts to view the fraught and tenuous relationship between Manto and the Progressives as offering an insight about how Manto undermines the narrow and political definition of the 'progressive' in favor of an all-encompassing, complex and literary response that could faithfully portray the conflicts of his times. It offers a brief historical and cultural contextualization of the Progressive Writers' Movement documenting its beginnings, popularity, and gradual fading, while assessing Manto as a 'progressive' both in the sense of Progressive Writers of the 1940s and Manto's own commitment to the progressive ideals of living life and representing it through literature. The paper concludes that Manto's status as a "Progressive" writer must be reassessed to account for the fissures within the Progressive Writers' Association, the pitfalls of a radical movement arrogating to itself the right to determine standards of literariness, and to locate within these fraught relationships a profound, albeit marginalized worldview of an author that deserves to be read in its own terms.

Keywords. Progressive, Political, Obscenity, Sa'adat Hasan Manto, Partition, Psychological, Literary Poetry, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Love, Resistance, Politics.

Introduction

Sa'adat Hasan Manto (1912-1955) is invariably invoked as one of the most fearless Urdu writers. He espoused the spirit of the All-India Progressive Writers' Movement that radically influenced art, literature, music, and cinema of the Indian subcontinent in the 1940s. Manto's varied body of writing includes short-stories, essays, radio-plays, sketches, and

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letters that evince a strong and consistent engagement with the condition of women, anti-colonial struggle, and the horrors of partition, and are, therefore, often viewed as examples of socially purposive art that defined the Movement. However, his large literary and popular corpus is neither encapsulated nor can be defined exclusively in terms of "progressivism" that dominated the socio-political and literary milieu of the 1930s and the 40s. Concomitantly, Manto's tempestuous relationship with the Movement itself, and some of its prominent writers, including Devendra Satyarthi, Sardar Jafri, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, and Sajjad Zaheer, made him an uncomfortable presence within its ideology. Manto was at the receiving end of ideological appropriation and exclusion during and after his life, and was ironically criticized by Zaheer for not towing the line of "cultural discipline" (qtd. in Jalil, *Loving Progress* 252). The dubbing of his works as reactionary, and the mounting number of obscenity cases slapped on his stories led to his ultimate ostracization and alienation from the Progressive Writers Movement.

In this context, this paper proposes to examine a variety of Manto's writings including his "Foreword" to *Chughad* (1948), his essay "*Jaib-e Kafan*" ("Afterword"), short-story "*Boo*", vignettes on Partition "Siyāh Ḥāshiye," as well as his comments about the role and nature of art in society to arrive at an understanding of what it means to be a "progressive" (writer) in an overtly ideological and socially-committed literary movement. This paper argues that Manto demands to be read politically but frustrates any reductive attempts to do so. As Priyamvada Gopal argues, the Progressive Writers' Association "is a history of struggle and contestation and not of the unilateral triumph of authoritarianism" (4). This paper is an attempt to view the fraught and tenuous relationship between Manto and the Progressives as offering an insight about how Manto undermines the narrow and political definition of the 'progressive' in favor of an all-encompassing, complex and literary response that could faithfully portray the conflicts of the times he was living in. In what follows, is a brief historical and cultural contextualization of the Progressive Writers' Movement documenting its beginnings, popularity, and gradual fading. The second part of the essay tries to assess Manto as a 'progressive' both in the sense of Progressive Writers of the 1940s as well as Manto's own commitment to the progressive ideals of living life and representing it through literature. The paper concludes that Manto's status as a "Progressive" writer must be reassessed to account for the fissures within the Progressive Writers' Association, the pitfalls of a liberal and radical movement arrogating to itself the right to determine standards of literariness, and to locate within these fraught relationships a profound,

albeit marginalized worldview of an author that deserves to be read in its own terms.

The Progressive Writers' Movement

The beginnings of what was to be formally recognized as the Progressive Writers' Movement can be traced to the discussions and debates that took place amongst the expressly Left-leaning intellectuals of Oxford and Cambridge around the growing communalism, economic deprivation, exploitation and religious oppression in the yet undivided India. Their concern with the need of literature and arts to discard age-old sentimentalism, dogmatism, and religious themes in favor of realistic portrayal of the actual problems of their day and age culminated in the publication of an anthology of Urdu short stories named *Angarey* (*Embers*; 1932). *Angarey* carried stories by Sajjad Zaheer, Mahmuduzzafar, Rashid Jahan, and Ahmed Ali, all of whom went on to become the leading members of the Progressive Writers' Movement. It attempted to portray the exploitation of middle and lower classes and launched a searing attack on conservative Muslim society. *Angarey* was considered extremely bold in its literary approach that deployed straightforward language and dealt with taboo topics inviting massive outrage and critical backlash. Owing to the furore created in the political, social, and literary circles of the time, on 15 March 1933, the Government of the United Provinces banned it under section 295A of the Indian Penal Code. A report dated 21 February 1933 in *Hindustan Times* quoted the resolution passed by the Central Standing Committee of the All-India Conference, Lucknow, which condemned *Angarey* as a "filthy document" that was "extremely objectionable from the standpoints both of religion and morality" (qtd. in Mann 67). *Angarey* had thus irked the Muslim conservatives due to its frank and bold treatment of gender and sexuality and criticism of religious orthodoxies.

Amidst the growing protest against the book, the authors published a statement titled "In Defence of *Angare*, Shall We Submit to Gagging" in which they justified the "truthfulness of those portraits" and their intent to culminate their fervent spirit of rebellion into a "League of Progressive Authors" who would write similarly not only in Urdu but in English and the various vernacular languages of the country (qtd. in Mahmud 451). In 1936, the Progressive Writers' Association was formed with its manifesto, printed in the *Left Review,* London, which declared the objectives of the movement in the following words:

> It is the object of our association to rescue literature and other arts from the priestly, academic and decadent classes in whose hands they have degenerated for so long; to bring the arts into the closest touch with people and to make them the vital

> organs which will register the actualities of life, as well as lead us to the future.
>
> While claiming to be the inheritors of the best tradition of Indian civilization, we shall criticize, in all its aspects, the spirit of reaction in our country […]. We believe that the new literature of India must deal with the basic social backwardness and political subjection. All that drags us down to passivity, inaction and unreason, we reject as reactionary. All that arouses in us the critical spirit, which examines institutions and customs in the light of reason, which helps us to act, to organize ourselves, to transform, we accept as progressive (qtd. in Pradhan 20-21).

Finally, the much-needed valorization of the movement came from none other than Premchand, who presided over the first meeting of the All-India Progressive Writers' Association in Lucknow and delivered his keynote address "*Sahitya Ka Udesshya*". Premchand emphasized the social utility of literature and its ability to inspire people in the direction of progressivism while breaking all shackles of oppression and orthodoxies. Truly "beautiful" literature, according to this new aesthetic and political yardstick would be the one that does not shy away from the grim and dark realities of life. Premchand defined "progressive" as "that which creates in us the power to act", one that makes the reader "examine those subjective and objective causes" of degeneration in society, and which "helps us to overcome and remove those causes" (qtd. in Pradhan 54-55). He emphasized that the sentimental and romantic literature of the past must now give way to dynamic writings focused towards the socio-political problems of the present age. He unequivocally declared, "I have no hesitation in saying that I judge art from the point of utility" (qtd. in Pradhan 54-55).

The programmatic agenda of Progressive literature was, therefore, amply clear. Because of its passionate commitment to the cause of national freedom as well as freedom of expression in literature and other arts, the movement drew writers and artists from all across the country and became a formidable literary force. Progressive writers were self-conscious intellectuals who not only encoded a vocabulary of protest in literature but also created a new literary trend that was social realist and which considered the day-to-day problems of women and working classes as rightful matters of literary representation. The phenomenon that began with *Angarey* indeed altered the definition of "forward-looking" in profound ways as a section of society viewed it as blasphemous or immoral while others looked up to it as radical, new-age writing (Jalil, *Loving Progress* xvii). With its invigorating

insistence on social change as the propelling force behind literary activities, the influence of the Progressive Writers' Movement spread beyond literature to film, radio, music and drama.

However, the Progressive Writers' Movement also became a victim of its own prejudices and ideological stiffness. Amongst other things, it seemed that the representatives of the movement became the final arbiters of deciding a piece of literature as worthy of being called "literary" or "non-literary", "purposive" or "obscene", "realistic" or "fanciful". Geeta Patel has argued that the Progressive Writers' Movement gradually became bifurcated along two factions: the "political" (*siyāsī/taraqqī pasand*) and "creative" (*jadīdiyat*) writers", which also pointed towards the split between the "public, social, historical, material on one hand and private, individual, psychological/mystical, and linguistic on the other" (114). While the first half of the dichotomies corresponded to a "valorized politicized literary stance (socialist, realist, *haqīqat parast*)", the second half was associated with a "devalued "depoliticized" (modernist, *jadīdiyāt*)" one. Many writers who wrote from a subjective or individual standpoint and could not fully tow the line of the professed political ideology of the movement were condemned, criticized, shunned, and in some cases ostracized. Another critical assessment of the Progressives relates to the lack of creative or literary experimentation by writers who were mostly preoccupied with the representation of social reality "as it is" and therefore relied solely upon realistic and mimetic paradigms (See Memon, *The Colour of Nothingness* xvii, xxi). According to Memon, the Progressive vision of the contemporary man was blinkered as they saw him only as a "victim of socio-economic forces"; that "man could be a psychological being with memory, desire and history, be a part of a cultural continuum, have an inner life, a distinct personality—these questions were deemed irrelevant and were completely ignored by them" (xviii). Ahmed Ali, one of the most important intellectuals of the Movement was vocal about his criticism of the Movement's tendency to "accept […] one set of dogmas and sticking to it" (37). He defined at length what "progress" meant to individualistic writers like him arguing that "Progress to us had not meant identification with the worker and the peasant alone, nor the acceptance of a particular ideology or set of political beliefs" (37). Ali, who never joined the Communist Party in his life, therefore, argued for greater freedom of expression and room for creativity and experimentation than what the existing paradigms of the Progressive Movement had permitted.

The Progressives frequently dubbed the works of the "others" or the "renegades" as obscene, reactionary, or null from a utilitarian point of view, ultimately marginalizing the writers who went beyond the Progressive

"formula" to create literature in their unique and individualistic idiom. Sajjad Zaheer in his memoir, *The Light*, however, refutes these charges by stating that the objective of the Movement was "not to limit the vision of the writer, but to broaden it" and to "endow it with the sensibility that can only unfold when one emerges from the confined toy house of egotism to share in the suffering, happiness, and sadness of all humanity" (129). One can locate Sa'adat Hasan Manto's turbulent relationship vis-à-vis the Progressive Writers' Movement within these literary, social, and cultural contexts that led to the popularity and subsequent loss of it of one of the most influential literary movements in the Indian subcontinent.

Assessing Sa'adat Hasan Manto as a "Progressive" Writer:

Saadat Hasan Manto, the *enfant terrible* of Urdu literature, was born in 1912 into a humble, conservative family in Samrala, Punjab. He lived his life across Amritsar, Delhi, Bombay, and Lahore, working as a translator, short-story writer, radio dramatist, essayist, and screenplay writer for films. Throughout his career, he churned story after story and essay after essay that many a times posed difficult challenges of interpretation. Harish Narang perceptively argues that there is hardly a writer other than Manto who has "provoked […] such extreme reactions from reviewers and readers, priests and laymen, lawyers and judges, critics and creative writers" (70). For instance, while his story "Toba Tek Singh" (1954) is considered one of the masterpieces of Partition literature, evoking nothing short of "a spiritual experience", another one namely "Khol Do" ("Open It"; 1948)[1] was banned by the Pakistan government for "breach of public peace" (qtd. in Narang 69, 70). Similarly, "Boo" ("Odour"; 1944) (discussed later in this essay) evoked extremely contradictory responses from Sardar Jafri that had disappointed Manto and contributed to his further estrangement from the Progressive Writers' Movement.

Manto and his works received critical acclaim following the renewed interest in Partition narratives ensuing from a critical engagement with Subaltern Studies and Postcolonialism in the late 80s and early 90s. During his lifetime, Manto found himself increasingly at odds both with the colonial government and the custodians of Progressive literature, his last years being spent in acute poverty and alcoholism. Today, when Manto is resurrected as a writer par excellence, there is still a tendency to read Manto selectively, primarily focusing on his Partition stories or those written on the sordid conditions of living, hardships and prejudices faced by sex-workers. Ironically, it is these very stories that were marked by scandal and/or tried for obscenity charges during the 1940s. Manto was, thus, compelled to justify his work on numerous occasions and fight his own

[1] Published in *Nuqoosh* in 1948.

court cases. Nevertheless, Manto is mostly included in the canon of Progressive writers along with Krishan Chander, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Kaifi Azmi, and Sardar Jafri, owing to which his position as a 'progressive' must be assessed in greater detail. The fact that Manto was initially celebrated as a young, Progressive writer while later on discarded as "a prince of pornographers"[2] demands an examination of the various aspects of his writings and beliefs about his role and responsibilities as a writer that stymie attempts to neatly slot or brand him as a writer of one particular ideology or movement.

To begin with, Manto has often been read as a writer of "low-life fiction" (Rushdie 52), his work being dominated by what Ibadat Barelwi has called the "little person" (qtd. in Jalil 315). Critics have pointed towards the overwhelming presence of characters belonging to the lower strata of society in Manto's works that has led to its identification as literature about the subaltern subjectivity. According to this assessment, Manto's works can surely fit into the Progressive mould and therefore, can be read as socially purposive and championing the cause of the downtrodden. Professor Harish Narang, for instance, has argued that Manto's preoccupation with the lives of "the marginalized and the subaltern" is in conjunction with his agenda, "the clear objective of not only changing the course of the majority discourse but to subvert it" (87). To be fair to Manto, he wrote on almost all subjects and about all sorts of characters hailing from different social milieus and each embodying a characteristic personality. As Rakhshanda Jalil has highlighted, Manto's range of characters is extremely diverse and in his work we find prostitutes, washermen, water-carriers, pimps, tongawallas, film-makers, chain-smokers, pickpockets, school teachers, journalists, tinsmiths and shopkeepers, all represented with a rare ease and penetrating realism (Jalil, *Naked Voices*).

Several stories written by Manto, such as "1919 ki ek Bāt" ("A Tale of 1919"; 1951)[3]; "Tamāsha" ("Spectacle"; 1936)[4], "Naya Qanoon" ("New Constitution"; 1940)[5], "Swarāj Ke Liye" ("For Self-Government";1950)[6], amongst others, actively resist colonial power. In "Naya Qānoon", for instance, Mangu, a tonga-driver, dreams of liberation from the colonial masters and voices the deep-rooted anger of the ordinary Indians against the British rulers. In "Swarāj Ke Liye" Manto picks up his pen to document

[2] Sadiq, Muhammad. *Twentieth Century Literature.* Royal Book Company, 1983, pp. 305.
[3] Published in the collection *Yazid*, Lahore, Maktaba e Jadid, 1951.
[4] Published in the collection *Ātish pare*, Lahore, Urdu Bookstall, 1935.
[5] Published in the collection *Manto ke Afsāne*, Lahore,1940.
[6] Published in the collection *Namrūd ki khudāi*, Lahore, Naya Idarah, 1950.

the exploitation of women by religious institutions against the backdrop of an anti-colonial wave in the city of Amritsar. In a remarkable example of literary resistance, Manto levels his critique against the call for abstaining from sex to achieve the goals of national freedom. The demand that fails to accept the primal needs of the human body is nothing more than a gimmick for Manto. In the much-quoted story, "1919 ki ek Bāt" Manto creates the character of Thaila Kanjar who redeems himself of his degenerate habits by leading a rebellion against the oppressive British administration. In several stories, Manto portrayed the sordid lives of prostitutes and pimps, drawing attention to their deplorable lives, conditions of exploitation, poverty, and debased existence.

If such themes of his stories certainly won Manto the appreciation of Progressive writers, Manto's own literary influences in the early years of his life in Amritsar were in tandem with the explicitly Marxist leanings of the Progressive Writers' Movement. Under the tutelage of his mentor, Abdul Bari Alig, Manto actively translated the works of Russian authors and was influenced by the writings of Gogol, Chekhov, Dostoyevsky, and Gorky. In addition, he contributed essays to the Urdu magazine *Ālamgīr* on the Russian Revolution, one of them being "Surkh Inquilāb" ("Red Revolution") which dealt with the prevalent social conditions of women. The "Woman Question" was central to the objectives of the Progressive Writers' Movement as evident in the revolutionary writings of Rashid Jahan, one of the contributors to *Angarey*, and Ismat Chughtai, both of whom were vociferous advocates of women's emancipation through education, and spoke fervently against oppressive patriarchal value systems, while championing a frank delineation of women's sexuality in literature. Manto's earlier essays and writings that talked about women with a great deal of sensitivity were therefore, bound to win the appreciation of the Progressives. Manto's comments on literature and the role of art also go a long way in enabling him to be read as a 'Progressive' writer. In his widely read essay, "Adab-e Jadīd" ("Modern Literature"; 1944), first delivered as a lecture at Jogeshwari College, Bombay, Manto categorically identified himself as a Progressive, inasmuch as every human being by his very existence *should be* a progressive (emphasis mine). Manto also drew attention to the need and ability of literature to change with time (*Dastāvez* 4, 24-5). Manto points to the manner in which he writes with a white chalk against a black board to present the reality of a grim and dark world in stark contrast. In another essay, "Kasautī" ("Touchstone"; 1956)[7], Manto emphasizes upon the transformative potential of literature by arguing that it is not a disease but rather its alternative, a measure of a nation or a community's

[7] Published in the collection *Lazzat-e Sang*, Lahore, Nayā Idāra, 1956.

health, its very pulse (*Dastavez* 4, 61). Owing to these reasons, Manto could be seen as creating socially purposive art, much like the Progressives who composed poetry and produced literature with the avowed agenda of radical social transformation.

However, Manto was gradually being criticized and sidelined by the more politicized members of the Progressive Writers' Movement beginning with the publication of his short-story "Boo" ("Odour") in the journal *Adab-e Latīf* (1944). "Boo" delves into the highly intimate sexual encounter of a young man named Randhir with a low-caste *ghātin*[8] woman, that is at complete variance with his previous experiences with Anglo-Indian prostitutes. In the words of Asaduddin, "the sexual activity in this story is portrayed as something primal, pure jouissance, unhindered by any social convention or any moral taboos or scruples" (23). The sensual, almost soulful experience consumes Randhir to such an extent that many years later, on his wedding night, he ends up being haunted by the raw sexual intimacy and the peculiar earthy odour of the fisherwoman rather than the artificiality of his newly wedded wife. Sardar Jafri had castigated "Boo" as a "sick and repulsive thing", its repulsiveness making it reactionary (qtd. in Jalil 48). "Boo" was slapped with an obscenity case and was publicly condemned by Sajjad Zaheer in 1945 as an example of "obscenity, immorality" that "revolts against all kinds of cultural discipline" (252). It was also ironical that being one of those who had spearheaded a movement as radical and outspoken as the Progressive Writers' Movement which itself was boycotted on the charges of vulgarity, Zaheer proclaimed "Being serious writers, Progressive writers have never encouraged obscenity" (252). The growing accusations that the "Progressives advocate heresy, irreligiousness, and immorality" (252) combined with the impending obscenity trial of Manto and Chughtai had created anxieties within the Progressive Writers' Association owing to which a resolution against obscenity was introduced at the All-India Progressive Writers' Association conference in Hyderabad in 1945. Zaheer categorically declared that "[They] felt that need for such a statement all the more because some Urdu writers (for example Saadat Hasan Manto) whose work had some elements of Progressiveness, and who wrote some good Progressive short stories, were at times inclined towards obscenity" (253). The Progressives, thus, went at lengths to distance themselves from writers like Manto and Chughtai whose brand of writing proved to be 'problematic' to the Movement and were thus seen as reactionary and obscene.

Not only "Boo", but even Manto's highly experimental and piercing Partition vignettes "Siyāh Hāshiye" (Black Margins; 1948) had to face the

[8] fisherwoman

brunt of hostility by the Progressives. "Siyāh Hāshiye" is a collection of ironical anecdotes, some of them, for instance, "An Enterprise" and "Sorry" consisting only of two to four lines, that lay bare the banal reality of Partition violence, loot, rape, arson, and murder. Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi, the secretary-general of the Punjab branch of Progressive Writers' Association accused Manto of voyeurism in writing "Siyāh Hāshiye," "What I can see is a field littered with dead bodies where the writer is stealing cigarette butts and money from their pockets" (qtd. in Sehbai n.p.). Constantly finding himself at the receiving end of the Progressives' appropriation and exclusion from their fold, Manto expressed his frustration and confusion in his "Foreword" ("Deebācha")[9]. Manto called out the hypocritical attitude of the Progressives towards him as they shunned him as "reactionary, opportunistic, individualistic, hedonistic and escapist" on the one hand, yet advertising his books in magazines like *Savera*, owned by Nayā Idāra, a Progressive publication house (444), on the other. He also accused the Progressives of being extremely rigid and intolerant of those who did not espouse the 'Progressive' ideology or belonged to different schools of literary traditions. A case in point was the harsh criticism levied by the Progressives on "Siyāh Hāshiye", allegedly because Muhammad Hasan Askari who supported the *jadīd-parast* (modernist) movement in Urdu literature wrote its foreword. He even pointed out that his stories like "Babu Gopinath" (1948) and "My Name is Radha" (1948)[10], that had earlier been appreciated by people like Krishan Chander and Ali Sardar Jafri, were suddenly being dismissed as "reactionary, immoral, sordid and depraved" (443). Indeed, Manto's increasing exclusion and alienation from the Progressive cohort amounted to not only literary, but also social exile.

At the same time, Manto's alienation from the Progressive Writers' Movement stems from a more serious difference than just of political affiliation. Paying close attention to the diversity and sophisticated artistry of Manto's writings, one can notice that while they are firmly rooted in the contexts of contemporary reality, they are also deeply engaged with the individualistic responses of their characters towards external exigencies. In this respect, one needs to read Manto's stories in tandem with his essays and views about literature for their deep psychological penetrativeness in understanding how and why human beings behave in different situations in

[9] All references to this essay are from Muhammad Umar Memon's translations of Manto's short stories and essays in the anthology titled *My Name Is Radha: The Essential Manto*, Penguin India, 2015.

[10] Both "Babu Gopinath" and "My Name is Radha" were first published in Urdu in the collection *Chugh'd*, Bombay, Kitab Publishers (1948).

the way they do. It would be useful to draw upon Geeta Patel's suggestion as how the Progressive Writers' Movement brought literature and social action together. According to Patel, the first method is to regard "literary activity as labor (*'amal*) in, of and for the socius (*samāj*) as political (*siyāsi*)" which has social consequences (*maqsad*); the second bond between literature and social action is that literature reflected social conditions, as a mirror or *ā'inah* (115). One can argue that while several aspects of Manto's works show a working similar to this Progressive method, their full meaning is not exhausted by either of these mechanisms.

While Manto certainly composed works that were socially engaged, he hesitated in ascribing an explicit social or moral purpose to them or their ability to bring about definite social change. What he tried best was to present reality from as novel and unexpected perspectives as he could so that the reading public could develop a new awareness about the reality around them. Manto does not seem to be concerned with underlining any overt or covert lessons for his readers to imbibe from his stories but rather being faithful to the situations and responses of his characters he set out to capture in his stories. In "Siyāh Hāshiye," Manto creates flash accounts of Partition violence which are deeply ironical and matter-of-fact in their tone, even as they portray the banal reality of loot, rape, arson, and murders that human beings inflicted upon one another. Muhammad Hasan Askari writes in the context of Manto's Partition stories that he "nurtures no grandiose notions about the efficacy of short stories to reform nor has he saddled himself with such a responsibility", flinging out the question of good and evil, oppressor and oppressed (441). According to Askari, Manto's perspective here is "neither political, nor sociological nor moral, but literary and creative", wherein he only attempts to portray man and his propensities as strange and complex, "a compound of discordant elements" (453). In other words, Askari asserts the primacy or the artistic freedom and creativity of Manto as a writer. For his own part, while Manto could boast about his ability to portray reality in a stark manner, he maintained that writers are not prophets, lawgivers or even inquisitors; writers diagnose ailments but they do not run hospitals ("The Short Story Writer and Matters of Sex" 424). Thus, Manto's progressivism could not be defined in political terms in the way Progressive writers proscribed artists to, nor could it be read purely as programmatic fiction for social change.

Secondly, it is true that Manto was a realist whose works are firmly ensconced within the conflicts, challenges, and anxieties that characterized the modernizing Indian society of the late-colonial India. Afterall, Manto himself identifies his writings as mirroring the age in which he was living. In his famous essay, "Adab-e Jadīd", he proclaims, "If you are not familiar with the age in which we live, read my stories. If you cannot endure my

stories, it means that this age is unbearable" (qtd. in Asaduddin and Memon 9). However, Manto goes beyond the representation of external reality 'as it is' which was the mimetic tradition in which the Progressives wrote. Manto's literary response to life and circumstances around him is not merely external but also individualistic, personal, and psychological. In rendering the complex and variegated psychological aspects of reality, Manto went beyond the trappings of the external world and wrote in a language that was many a time symbolic, fluid, experimental, stark and bare as reality itself. Not only are his short-stories such as "*Phuṉdnē*" ("Tassels"; 1955) and "*Saṛak ke Kināre*" ("By the Roadside"; 1953) written with an astute psychological depth, but also his radio-plays like "Akeli", "Trṛhī Lakīr", and "Nīlī Ragen"[11]. Sex and sexual relations formed an integral part of this psychological exploration of the human mind. In her analysis of the controversial story "Boo", Leslie Flemming has argued that Manto's focus here is the "fundamental loneliness of his protagonists and their isolation" (60). Rather than explicit dwelling on the body of the *ghātin* girl for the purpose of titillation, Manto wants to create a highly evocative and sensory experience of the sexual union of two completely opposite human beings capturing a moment that is devoid of any exchange of words or regard for social conventions. Manto liberally uses imagery of rain, mud, and pottery to suggest the vital and basic nature of sexual relations. Through the synesthetic totality of "Boo", Manto presents one of the most nuanced explorations of the sexual experience which in itself speaks of the creativity of its author and his readiness to explore through his craft those nooks of human psyche that remain embedded underneath the artificiality of social customs, conventions and commitments.

Another aspect of Manto's subscription to realist fiction is his acknowledgement of his inability to fully express through literature the overwhelming nature of human existence. There is a lot in Manto that reveals his acute ambiguity with respect to the role of artist-intellectual in society, troubled by the questions of human existence. In his letter to Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi, Manto admits that the "complex that could not be expressed in words" confuses him, occupying a liminal space between "the perfect comprehension of the outside world and its complete obscurity" (186-7)[12]. This complexity that lies at the heart of Manto's literary corpus relates to his unsettled creative self and his tremendous suspicion and loss of faith in possibilities out of the present degradation, especially towards the later half of his life in Pakistan. His elevation of doubt and skepticism

[11] All three plays are from the collection *Manto ke drāme*, Lahore, Naya Idara, 1940.
[12] All references to his letters are taken from *Dastāvez* (Part IV) unless otherwise specified. Translations mine.

as the prerequisites of understanding modern life made him align better with the modernists and *jadīd-parast* literature than with the self-assured and agenda-driven Progressives.

The question then arises—did Manto's works possess any (or greater) polemical edge than those of his contemporaries, given that the age in which he lived was one of the most politically and culturally turbulent ones, both globally and in the Indian subcontinent. It can be safely argued that Manto thwarts any attempts to read him according to any one set of literary or political ideologies, movements or dictums. His essay "Jaib-e Kafan" ("Afterword")[13] is an angry rebuttal to the arrogant posturing of the Progressive writers wherein he expresses his discontent in reducing literature to politics and vice-versa. In very categorical terms, he argues that "[P]olitics has its own place. It's not fair to use literature to get to it. Likewise, it is wrong to use the labyrinthine by-lanes of politics to arrive at a literature worthy of its name" (440). While Manto believed in producing socially conscious literature, it was his commitment towards plumbing the depth of human experience in its totality that defined his literary endeavors. Manto was brave enough to tackle the themes of sexuality, madness, violence, necrophilia, human isolation, and alienation in a vocabulary that neither subscribed fully to the tenets of *taraqqī-pasandī* and/or *jadīdiyat*, thereby complicating their interpretation via set codes. Use of sparse language, experimentation with temporality, interior monologue, and free association in many of his works to tackle the above-mentioned themes elevate them both linguistically, formally, and aesthetically. Manto demands to be read politically without offering a route to reduce his literary genius to any one particular ideology or literary tradition. Owing to the absence of any explicit commentary or critique of material conditions as good or bad made Manto seem 'apolitical' or his work carrying no social value by the Progressives. As referred above in this essay, devalorizing such forms of "discursive critique" in works of writers like Manto and Miraji, became a strategy of marginalizing and excluding them from the Progressive canon[14].

It was alleged by Sardar Jafri that Manto and Krishan Chander wrote different types of stories. Where Krishan's heroes are "courageous and conscious builders of life" representing evolution, "Manto's heroes are mutilated men" and therefore not "representative" (qtd. in Jalil 48). It could be argued that it was in the representation of man acting upon his extreme propensities, in the middle of his psychological or social crisis out of which he may or may not be able to extricate himself meaningfully, that Manto's

[13] All references to this essay are from Muhammad Umar Memon's translations of Manto's short stories and essays in the anthology titled *My Name Is Radha: The Essential Manto*, Penguin India, 2015.

[14] See Patel 123.

creative and literary interest lay. As a writer true to his calling, he was extremely critical of derivative nature of knowledge production amongst the Progressives who had devised "schemes to transform machines into ghazals and vice versa" (Afterword 437). Manto felt no need to always balance the darkness of human life with possible maladies but to capture the essence of human experience as it manifested in response to the situations around him. In this respect, Manto was as far-sighted, bold, and honest as any progressive person should be.

Conclusion

This paper has critically reassessed the status of Sa'adat Hasan Manto as a Progressive writer, situating his love-hate relationship with the proponents of the Progresssive Writers' Movement of the 1930s and 40s in the Indian subcontinent. By delineating the objectives of the Movement along with the ways in which it became restrictive, this paper has studied Manto's life and works as specimens of how a profound worldview about human life and role of literature runs the risk of being marginalized, ostracized and erroneously dubbed as "deviant" or "reactionary". It has delved into the mechanisms through which literature was seen as an instrument of social change and has argued that these methods soon became strategies of exclusion of writers such as Manto who could not fully adhere to its dictums, whether it be through a commitment to programmatic action or avowed social agenda transcribed in his writings, or presumably writing individualistic, psychological and experimental fiction that could not be slotted within the paradigms of "*taraqqī-pasandī*". In this respect, Manto could not be a prophet figure that could posit constructive "solutions" to the problems of his age, much to the chagrin of the Progressive flagbearers. On the other hand, Manto was also not a "renegade" or a betrayer that the Progressives made him out to be, simply because he was much more than a "Progressive". This paper has shown through various examples that while Manto was faithful to the Progressive tenets of social realism and socially engaged literature, he went much beyond that such that his works could lend themselves to an array of interpretative models whether modernist, realist, progressive or humanist. While he started off as a writer in the realist mode, his writings exemplify an evolution towards psychological exploration of the human mind and a readiness to explore complex themes of sexual experience, alienation, violence, and madness in an aesthetic idiom which is uniquely his own. In this way, he embodies the "progressive" spirit not in the narrow sense of political commitment but a wholesome vision of life that defined his own as well as those of his characters. It is a worldview which is not always self-assured or confident of the solutions out of the present degradation, but

one that nevertheless upholds honesty, ethics, frankness, and deep sensitivity towards people and situations around oneself as admirable values of human life.

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