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“Dear Uncle Sam, From Pakistan, With Love”: Manto’s ‘Letters to Uncle Sam’ in His Time, and In Ours

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Abstract

Saadat Hasan Manto wrote his Letters to Uncle Sam at a crucial juncture, both for his native country Pakistan, as well as the country he addressed, the United States. Not taken very seriously either by social scientists or literary critics today, these letters are one of the earliest exponents of literature engaging with the realities of the post-WWII world, giving birth to the postcolonial state in the developing world on one hand and a bipolar world divided between the Soviet Union and the United States on the other. These letters starkly portray the alienation which many leaders and intellectuals (like Manto) of the newly-emerging developing countries felt vis-à-vis US imperialism and capitalism. Crucially for Pakistan and Pakistani literature, much earlier than the current (post-9/11) political and fictional obsession with the jihadi fundamentalist par excellence, Manto presciently and accurately sketched the profile of the Islamic fundamentalists and the West’s cynical use of them across the Muslim world (during the Cold War against communism) in these Letters, in the early 1950s. He thus becomes an unlikely prophet predicting the rise of fundamentalism not just in Pakistan, but across the postcolonial landscape. His Letters to Uncle Sam also offer an antidote to the narrative about the ‘clash of civilizations’ in that they celebrate what is creative and wholesome about both Western (read American) and Pakistani/South Asian culture, while couching Manto’s disagreements with both US-style capitalism and Pakistani-style opportunism in biting satire. Manto’s Letters also offer an incisive and interesting critique of upper-class elite women in both the United States and Pakistan, before the feminist consciousness of the 1960s. Lastly, this author’s own translation experience with the ‘Letters’ reveal the extent to which their translation into English just

a year after Manto's death (1956) was censored, alongwith the rest of his work, thus cutting off the rest of the world's access to his writings and hampering understanding of his deeply ideological views. In the birth centenary year of Saadat Hasan Manto and the continuing fallout in Pakistani-US relations, the paper is an original and timely attempt to argue that Manto's Letters to Uncle Sam remains deeply relevant not only for understanding the literary-political present of Pakistan (and by extension, South Asia), but also as a harbinger of the postcolonial condition, not only in Manto's own time, but also in ours, in an era of overwhelming US military, political and cultural dominance.

First letter to Uncle Sam

Saadat Hasan Manto's prescient *Letters to Uncle Sam* were written in the early 1950s at a time of increasing financial insecurity, greater need for alcohol and sharpening of his pen, when the contours of Pakistan's foreign policy were just beginning to be shaped by an unconstitutional government; though written in a biting satirical vein, they contain a remarkable overview of history, politics, culture and international relations of the period, as it affected not only Pakistan and India, but the wider world as well. In his First Letter, Manto not only takes digs at the bloody tragedy of the partition of India, but compares his own poverty as one of 'Pakistan's great short-story writers' in a poor country with the ostentatious wealth of the United States which makes possible facial surgeries for the dead and opulent funerals for gangsters. He writes, *"I am poor because my country is poor, I'm lucky to still get two meals a day by any means, but there are some other fellows of mine who are too poor to even deserve this. My country is poor – why is it illiterate – you know this very well Uncle, this is one mutual chord of yours and your brother Bill's which I don't want to pluck, because it will come down hard on your hearing. I'm writing this letter as an obedient nephew that's why I should perhaps remain obedient from start to finish. You will ask and ask with a lot of amazement why my country is poor when so many Packards, Buicks and Max Factors reach it from your country...My country's population which rides these Packards and Buicks is not my country; my country is that where me and those worse than myself live."*

Second Letter

The Second Letter throws an interesting light on Uncle Sam's cultural politics during the Cold War when it was trying to woo the best artists of the postcolonial world in supporting the *jihad* against the Soviet Union; as well as the export of soft pornography to woo the illiterate masses to the American way of life. Manto was similarly approached, by the US Embassy, to write an ostensibly partisan piece and even after settling for a lucrative package, the latter failed to win him over because of Manto's fiercely independent views despite his playful observation that, *"As long as Pakistan needs wheat, I cannot be disrespectful to you, though as a Pakistani (despite the fact that my own government doesn't regard me as obedient) I pray that God willing one day you would also be in need of lentils and mustard and if I am alive till then, I could send you."* The tone of his letters gets progressively harsher as he proceeds to chastise American capitalism as manifested by its consumerist culture, as well as the various defence deals the US has conducted with both Pakistan and India, and the state of democracy in his own country.

Third Letter

In his Third Letter, he offers his Uncle a tantalizing proposal, *"Although you have millions and billions of nephews but you wouldn't find a nephew like me even in atomic light; do turn your attention here once in a while, just one interested gaze is enough. Just announce that your country, may God preserve it till world's end, will give military aid to my country (may God utterly wreck its distilleries) only if Saadat Hasan Manto is handed over to you."* Furthermore, *"A small, tiny atomic bomb I'll definitely demand from you, it's been a secret wish of mine since long that I should do one good deed in my life. You will ask, what is this good deed? You have done many good deeds though, and continue to do so; you wiped out Hiroshima, turned Nagasaki into smoke and dust as well as giving birth to millions of bastard American kids in Japan. I want to kill a dry-cleaner; some of our maulvis (clerics) here have a particular way of cleaning themselves after they urinate – but what will you understand – anyways it is like that after urinating they pick up a stone to clean themselves and reaching inside their shalwars while walking about*

throughout the bazaar openly dry-cleaning themselves. I just want that immediately after seeing such a person, I take out the signature atomic bomb which you gift me from my pocket and throw it at him so that he alongwith the stone blows up in smoke. The military pact with us is a great success, do stick to it. Over there with India you should also establish a similar relation, sell outdated weapons to both because you must have made redundant those weapons which you used in the last war. Your spare weaponry would be useful this way and your factories would not remain idle. Pandit Jawaharal Nehru is a Kashmiri, do gift him a gun which goes off after being kept in the sun; I'm also a Kashmiri but a Muslim. I have already asked you for the tiny atomic bomb. One thing more – the constitution has still not been framed here, for God's sake send us an expert from there as soon as possible. The country can do without an anthem; but not without a constitution. But if you want, it can, as the poet says: 'Whatever your miracle-working beauty wants, it does'." Satire apart, Manto was probably the first observer who foresaw early America's disastrous foreign policy in various parts of the Muslim world in the 1950s and 1960s leading right upto the war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, of assisting Islamic fundamentalist parties against the threat of rising communist and secular-nationalist forces, a process which has now come full-circle with the unannounced execution of one of their own armed mullahs Osama bin Laden, last year in Abbottabad.

Fourth letter

His foresight continues to dazzle with insight almost sixty years later in his Fourth Letter (he 'posted' the letter in 1954), *"India may grovel before you a million times but will definitely make a military aid pact with Pakistan because you are really worried about the integrity of this largest Islamic sultanate of the world and why not, as our mullahs are the best antidote to Russia's communism. If the military aid starts flowing, you should begin by arming the mullahs and dispatch vintage American (drycleaning) stones, vintage American rosaries and vintage American prayer mats, with special attention to razors and scissors, and if you bless them with the miraculous prescription of vintage American hair dye as well then do understand that the cat is in the bag. The purpose of military aid as far as I understand it is to arm*

these mullahs, I'm your Pakistani nephew but I am aware of all your machinations but this heightened intelligence is all thanks to your politics (God save it from the evil eye). If this sect of mullahs is armed American-style, then the Soviet Union will have to pick up its spittoon from here, even whose gargles are mixed up in communism and socialism. It is evident that you will try your best to raise up the lower-lower and lower-middle classes, recruitment will begin from these two classes, but I'm telling you that our upper class is capable of accepting all types of dishonor because they have already had their eyes washed out in your laundries, but the lower-lower and lower-middle class will not tolerate any such thing."

Manto then moves on to satirize the All-Pakistan Women Association (APWA), an elitist organization founded by Begum Ra'ana Liaquat Ali Khan, wife of the country's first (unelected) prime minister Liaquat Ali Khan, who also has the dubious distinction of banning the Communist Party of Pakistan and brought the country firmly into the American camp during the Cold War; this organization claimed to work for rights of Pakistani women and may well have served as a model for the dozens of women's NGOs which mushroomed in the country after the demise of its worst dictator, General Zia -ul-Haq. He writes, *"Please produce similar legs (as in the American film Bathing Beauty) so that we can also make such a film in our only film studio Shahnoor and show to APWA members so that they should feel a bit happy. APWA is a strange thing we have created which is the interesting result of the leisure activities of the great wives and daughters of great men. It is the acronym of the All-Pakistan Women Association and there is no room for further abridgement but a struggle is going on still which you can view in their ever-shortening blouses. The APWA ones are always ready to think about shortening their dresses as long as someone gives them a well-tried prescription."* And here he is again on the aesthetics of kissing, *"I would also like to say something to you about the kiss-proof lipstick which you had sent. It has spectacularly failed among our upper classes. Girls and ladies have observed that this is 'kiss-proof' in name only, but I think even the way they kiss is wrong. I have observed them during these acts, it seems as if they are eating a slice of watermelon...please send an American lady via air immediately who will make the difference between eating a melon slice and kissing totally clear to our upper class..."*

Fifth Letter

In his Fifth Letter, he brilliantly exposes America's pretensions to maintaining world peace even after acquiring hydrogen bomb-making capabilities, *"I have heard that you have made the hydrogen bomb just so that there should be absolute world peace. Although God knows better, but I am sure of what you say because I have eaten your wheat and after all, I'm your nephew. Although the young should readily obey the elderly, but I ask you if you did succeed in establishing world peace, wouldn't the world become a smaller space? I mean so many countries would be wiped off the face of the earth. My school-going niece was asking me yesterday to draw a world map, I told her, not now, first let me talk to Uncle; I will ask him which country will remain and which will not, then I will draw it. For God's sake, first of all, blow up Russia, for I hate it like anything. Regarding your decision to give military aid to Pakistan and other problems of the Far East over which you have disagreements with India and which Pandit Nehru had severely criticized a few days ago, I have heard that as a reaction to this your country is progressing towards a new strategy, some even think that America is trying a bit too hard in reassuring India of its aims. As far as I understand, by keeping Pakistan and India happy your sole objective is that wherever the flickering lamp of freedom and democracy is burning, it should not be extinguished by blowing it but should be oiled. In fact, drowned in oil so that it never again complains of being thirsty – isn't it so dear Uncle? You want to see Pakistan sovereign because you deeply love the Khyber Pass from where invaders have been attacking us for centuries. In fact, the Khyber Pass is also really very beautiful, does Pakistan really possess anything else more beautiful? And India you want to see being sovereign so because you are always wary seeing Russia's aggressive activities in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Korea lest this red republic begin working hammers and sickles in India too. Obviously if India loses its sovereignty, God forbid, it will be a big tragedy – you would start trembling just visualizing it."*

Seventh letter

While the Sixth Letter 'got lost in the post' (Manto cheekily blamed the communists for this misdeed in his Eighth Letter), his Seventh Letter makes fun of America's Cold War obsession with communism (this was still a few years before the Communist Party was banned in Pakistan in 1956) and offers a subversive suggestion: *"But this secret is now no longer one that in my country Pakistan communism is spreading swiftly. What should I hide from you? Sometimes I also wish to become a Red by sticking red feathers to myself."* In a passage which could have been written in the last couple of years, Manto offers some equally subversive remedies for America's financial crises, remarkably prescient if one looks at the state of that country today, as well as of Europe, and those with which John Maynard Keynes would have heartily agreed: *"Dear Uncle, I have heard a very disquieting news that your trade and commerce is passing through a very delicate period. You are wise by the grace of God, but please do also heed a fool's words. This trade and commercial crises has only happened because you stopped the Korean War. This was a big mistake. Now it's upto you to think where will your tanks, bomber jets and guns be sold. Undoubtedly the strong opposition of world public opinion has forced you to stop the war, but what does world public opinion matter to you? I mean how can the whole world confront your lone hydrogen bomb? You have stopped the Korean War. This is a big mistake but anyhow leave it. You should start a war between India and Pakistan. I dare you, if the benefits from the Korean War are not upended by the benefits of this particular war, then I won't ever have the right to be your nephew. Please do think, this war will be such profitable trade, all your armaments factories will begin to work on double shifts. India will buy weapons from you, and so will Pakistan. Your five fingers dipped in oil and your head in the frying pan. By the way, please continue with the Indo-Chinese war. Keep advising people that this is very noble work. The French people and French government can go to hell, if they are against this war so be it. We should not care about it. After all, our objective is to create world peace, right dear Uncle? I really like what your Mr Dulles said that the free world's objective is to defeat communism – this is the freedom-laden language of the hydrogen bomb."*

Eighth letter

Manto's Eighth Letter to Uncle Sam pokes light fun at the Soviet Union and reserves his sharpest pen for Saudi Arabia (and by extension for organized religion), with whom Pakistan's ruling elite has forged a close relationship, to the detriment of both its politics and culture in subsequent years. Here's Manto on the Soviet Union: *"One day that unfortunate (the communist poet Ahmad Rahi) began to say to me that you should leave Uncle Sam and initiate correspondence with Malenkov; after all he is your maternal uncle. I said this is true but he is my step-uncle he can never love me nor I him. In addition, I know that he doesn't treat his own real nephews so well too, those poor people are willing to lay down their lives for him and love him deeply. Clad in rags, despite their hardships they serve him and all he does is just to dispatch a dry appreciation by affixing a red stamp. English uncles, paternal and maternal, were a million times better than this Russian uncle. At least they used to pretend to elevate by bestowing such titles like Sir, Khan Bahadur and Khan Sahib; but Mr Malenkov doesn't even do this. I will only be convinced if they just give some kind of small title to Abdullah Malik who is their most faithful nephew. How convenient it will be for him to go to jail and write books with ease and comfort."* On Saudi Arabia: *"I am recounting briefly the eyewitness and overheard account of Saudi King Saud's Mecca. He reached Karachi via aircraft alongwith his twenty-five princes, where he was heartily welcomed. He has other princes too I don't know why they didn't come, maybe because two or three additional aircrafts would be required for the purpose; or maybe they are very young and they prefer their mother's lap to the aircraft. It's true: how can children brought up on their mothers' and she-camels' milk survive on Glaxo and Cow Gate dried milk. Dear Uncle! It is thoughtful that if King Saud had with him his twenty-five sons, by God's grace, only God knows how many girls there would be, may God give them long life, and save the King from the evil eye. Tell me that in your state of seven freedoms is there any such iron man who has so many children? Dear Uncle! This is all courtesy our religion Islam and this high honour was given to whoever got it. In my humble opinion, you should immediately declare Islam as your state religion. It will have a lot of advantages. Nearly every married man would be allowed to marry four times. If a woman gives birth to four children, even with a lot of miserliness, by this rule then sixteen boys and girls should be proof of a man's manliness and a woman's fertility. Boys and girls can be so useful in wartime. You*

are worldly-wise, you know better. If initially your married men have any type of problem handling four wives simultaneously, you can invite King Saud here to make use of his services. You are his friend; you and his late father were bosom buddies. I heard that you arranged a caravan of very grand cars as a gift for him and his harem. I think that King Saud will tell you all his presidential prescriptions. Nearly every country except India and Russia is taking an interest in Pakistan these days and it is all a result of your kindnesses that you have extended a hand of friendship and cooperation towards us; and we became so capable that others also began to view us kindly. We Pakistanis are ready to die for Islam. King Saud was feted alongwith his 22 or 25 princes in Government House, where all married and unmarried girls and women of high society participated. Cigarette-smoking was not permitted; not even to (Crown-Prince) Abdullah, however he is very safe without the cigarette smoke and he received this privilege owing to his vintage Islamic hospitality. His two dozen princes bought several Pakistani shoes in the Anarkali bazaar and gave a proof of their solidarity and good wishes. Now these shoes will walk on the sands of the Arabian Desert and imprint the temporary stamps of their longevity.”

Ninth letter

In his Ninth and final Letter, Manto satirizes some prominent journalists on the government and American payrolls during the Cold War, while passionately trying to prove his anti-communist and pro-American credentials: *“Just observe his (Marxist intellectual Sibte Hasan’s) arrogance, he says that Saadat you yourself are a communist whether you accept or not. Dear Uncle, this letter will soon pass through your eyes, I assure you with your seven freedoms and your dollars as my witness that I was never a communist nor I am one still, this is just a prank by Sibte Hasan, a very Red one, hell-bent on spoiling my relations with you. As you know I am ever faithful to you. I want to reassure you that I am not a communist, maybe I become a Qadiani but I will never become a communist, because these oafs just make do by a lot of talking shop and never really spend anything if they have to. Well same goes for Qadianis but at least they are Pakistanis and apart from that I don’t want to spoil my relations with them, because I know that you will need a prophet immediately after your hydrogen bomb tests, who can only*

be supplied by (Qadiani leader) Mirza Bashiruddin Mahmud. I have heard an announcement by the government of Iraq today that you have agreed to give military aid to this Islamic country as well; I have also come to know that the aid will be unconditional. Dear Uncle! If you were near me I would have kissed your feet, may God perpetuate you forever. Your kindnesses to the Islamic countries are ample proof that you are about to embrace Islam very soon. Japanese scientists have just revealed in an announcement that hydrogen bombs also affect the weather, reason being that you have recently tested this bomb in the Marshall Islands. These people say that Japan's weather was affected such that despite the end of April, they are still experiencing extreme cold, I don't know why those flat-looking Japanese don't like winter. We Pakistanis love it, can you please drop a hydrogen bomb over India? Summer has already begun here and if the weather turns cold, I will be in great comfort."

Manto and the South Asian literary-political present

Reading these words today, one can already sense that Manto had envisioned today's headlines, not only in terms of the relationship of Pakistan and India with Uncle Sam, but even the threat of nuclear proliferation. As I write this, the newspaper headlines scream out: *Pakistan, US exploring joint ownership of drone attacks; US apology further delayed; US describes India as a responsible N-state; 'Pragmatism (in Pakistan-US ties) is the name of the game'; and Drone strikes will continue: Panetta*. What more proof do we need of the continuing dominance of Uncle Sam in subcontinental affairs, and which Manto foresaw with such perspicacity in the middle of the last century? A few years after Manto's untimely death, Pakistan's unconstitutional government was replaced by a military coup, with the approval of the United States, and the coup-maker proclaimed with brutal honesty, "As far as I am concerned, the only embassy which matters is the American embassy." One wishes Pakistan's parliamentary governments, both elected and unelected, were just as honest about their relations with their favored Uncle. The country went on to sign up for the SEATO and CENTO military pacts, ostensibly to quarantine Arab nationalism and Arab oil. The era of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was the only time the country had some relief from acting as a bulwark against communism, and was allowed to have an independent foreign policy; nevertheless the

ties with Saudi Arabia, which Manto had lamented earlier on, were also re-cemented during this regime, with the immigration of thousands of impoverished Pakistani immigrants to that country. Saudi princelings may not have found a suitable matrimonial-cum-prostitution match in Pakistan, another fact which Manto lamented in his Letters, but they found a suitable home to hunt and kill to near-extinction the endangered species *houbara bustard*, also during and since Bhutto's regime! During the dictatorship of Pakistan's worst military dictator, Zia-ul-Haq, the country's transition to vassal-status was complete, as the country was used and abused by Uncle Sam for its strategic objectives to contain and eventually defeat the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. The parliamentary governments of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif maintained the hegemony of the American embassy, with Pakistani society becoming more intolerant and Saudized as a result of the fallout from the Afghan war. The next military ruler, Pervez Musharraf, quickly became Uncle Sam's favorite nephew by turning over the country to Uncle Sam's so-called War on Terror and now thanks to Wikileaks, we have a graphic view of the extent to which Uncle Sam and its embassy in Islamabad was involved in supporting the dictator, as well as encouraging the opposition, still consisting of the two traditional parties led by the late Bhutto and the Sharifs. The dictator's exit and return of parliamentary democracy to Pakistan has strengthened rather than weakened Uncle Sam's control over the country and its politicians; but make no mistake the army firmly remains under Uncle Sam's control, and will remain so as long as the country's politicians remain unreliable. The recent public execution of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan (after having lived there in hiding for years), the Memogate controversy where the Pakistani ambassador to Uncle Sam (in recent times he has come to resemble a mere clone of the various American proconsuls in the third world) had to resign following revelations that he tried to convince senior members of the American political elite via an unreliable fixer of removing the current Pakistani army chief and the tragic incident where NATO killed two dozen Pakistani soldiers last November, as well as the scarcely entertaining drama surrounding Pakistan's invitation to the Chicago summit are only symptoms of the wider malaise; the recent sham of a parliamentary review of relations between uncle and nephew following the latter would have irked Manto no end. This review has not only refused to call for an end to the drone attacks led by Uncle Sam which

have spread much dread, destruction and resentment in the country; but the fact that it was a closed-door process not open to public debate made it as undemocratic a process as any other in the past involving military aid pacts, treaties and other co-operation with Uncle Sam. There is now talk of taking 'joint ownership of drone attacks' and sharing of drone technology with the country's military elite, and the type of technology transfer this will entail should come as no surprise to readers of Manto's Seventh Letter. Meanwhile Manto would also have been distressed to know that the good old Pakistani mullah has come a long way from his dry cleaning and armed mercenary days, and is now openly and shamelessly pro-American, and that this prestige has come hand-in-hand with his 'victory' over godless communism and the rise of Saudi influence.

On the other hand, India did not begin as an American vassal state upon independence and had a more independent foreign policy, but still qualified for military aid from Uncle Sam, as Manto also noted in his letters. Being a favorite of Uncle Malenkov probably also meant a fixation with genuine neutrality rather than big-power status. However, with the passing of the Russian uncle, came the realization of orphanhood (the other south Asian Muslim nephew has had this orphanhood complex since its birth) and therefore the Indian nephew also clambered onto the bandwagon of Uncle Sam. Manto would have chronicled the wrangling over the India-US nuclear treaty and the failure of the Indian Left to make an impression in that struggle with disdain, as sure as he would have opposed the country's newfound status as Uncle Sam's proxy adjunct to halt the rise of China, probably bringing with it the license to do its own bidding in Kashmir (Manto was a proud Kashmiri himself). Neither would his ever-ready cynical eye have been slow to deconstruct the so-called India-Pakistan peace process which appears at the moment largely dictated by Uncle Sam's interests and the interests of its arms manufacturers and lobbyists, as well as the mammoth armies of its two fawning nuclear-nationalist nephews; the ordinary people haven't really benefitted from this process, ensconced as they are in a debilitating cycle of visa restrictions.

The Politics of Translating Manto

It was not just the partition of India or the suppression and indifference of the country's ideological and moral custodians which killed Manto; literary custodians played also an ignoble part. In fact, Manto used to joke with apparent irony, that the Pakistani government regarded him as a communist while the communists regarded him as a reactionary! A collection of his stories, essays and sketches translated in English by his nephew Hamid Jalal just a year after the former's death was quickly censored and withdrawn from circulation. Looking at the list some of the luminaries who received the Nobel Literature Prize between 1936 and 1955 – the period of Manto's intellectual efflorescence - today, one can only feel sorry for why some unknowns like du Gard, Sillanpaa, Jensen, Lagerkvist and even Mauriac received the award, and Manto didn't. It would have been a different story had Jalal's translations reached the Nobel Committee samizdat (and Manto would surely have heartily approved if the long arms of Uncle Sam had taken some time off from smothering democracy in Pakistan to help smuggle these to Oslo, like happened later in Solzhenitsyn's case; or maybe Manto was on the wrong side of the Cold War). Surely one of history's greatest warmongers Winston Churchill, the 1953 Nobel Laureate in Literature, might have been overlooked in favour of Manto that year; for it was the irresponsible policy instituted under the leadership of the former that led to the partition bloodbath resulting in the deaths of close to 1.5 million people, and which made Manto the consummate artist which he was: a perfect example of how poetic justice would have ideally been served. And Manto would have been a worthy successor to the only prior subcontinental winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature: Sir Rabindranath Tagore.

Saadat Hasan is dead. Long live Manto.

Note: All the translations of Manto (from the original Urdu) are my own.

