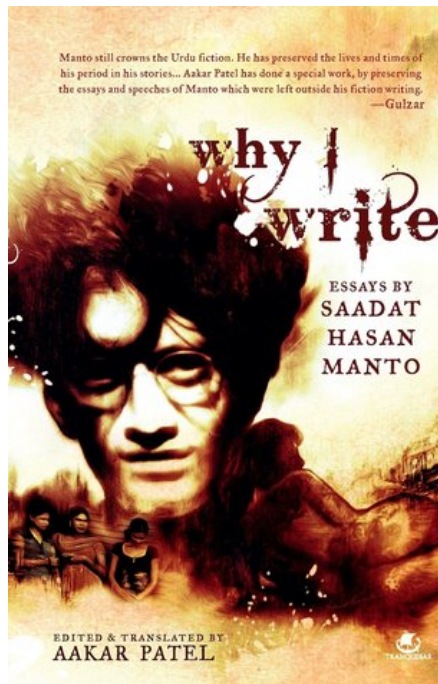




Why I Write: Essays by Saadat Hasan Manto

Saadat Hasan Manto , Aakar Patel (Translator and Editor)

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Why I Write: Essays by Saadat Hasan Manto Saadat Hasan Manto , Aakar Patel (Translator and Editor)

One of the greatest raconteurs of the 20th century, Saadat Hasan Manto declares that he was forced to write when his wife routinely demanded that he put bread on the table for the family. He doesn't attribute any genius to his skills as a writer and convinces his readers that the stories flowed even as he minded his daughters or tossed a salad. Equally, Manto treats his tryst with Bollywood with disdain and unmasks the cardboard lives of tinsel town when a horse is painted to double up for a zebra or multiple fans rotate to create a deluge. Two of Manto's favourite and recurring themes — Women and Partition—find special mention.

For the first time ever, this unique collection of non-fiction writing from the subcontinent's greatest writer, translated by well known author and journalist, Aakar Patel showcases Saadat Hasan Manto's brilliance while dealing with life's most mundane things — graveyards, bumming cigarettes, a film crew with motley characters from mythology — and a sharp dissection of what ails the subcontinent even after 6 decades —Hindi or Urdu, vile politicians and the hopelessness of living under the shadow of fear.

Why I Write: Essays by Saadat Hasan Manto Details

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From Reader Review Why I Write: Essays by Saadat Hasan Manto for online ebook

Tulika Singh says

I've been putting off this review for quite a while now. Not because the book was a tough one to read but because it wasn't my kind and I am not sure how to review it.

One: This is a translation – which I'm not fond of. Language I feel, is a part of the story and that is often lost in translation. Or so I thought.

And two This was titled 'Essays by Sadat Hasan Manto'.. essays? For me E.S.S.A.Y. spells B.O.R.I.N.G. Consider it a hangover from school.

This book served to dispel both those myths. I do continue to suspect though, that it would have read much better in the original Urdu. But then that might be because even if I do not know the language too well I remain partial to it.

The Book..

... is a collection of articles by Manto that appeared in various publications over a number of years. They have been edited and translated by Aakar Patel. I have no way of knowing how much of the original has been retained but Manto's thoughts certainly shine through.

The amazing thing about this book is that he wrote these articles (I prefer to call them that rather than essays) over six decades ago and yet they are more relevant than ever. It makes one think that either Manto had precognitive powers or that things really haven't changed over the years or perhaps we did make progress only to regress again.

Manto picks varied topics from something like surviving in the Indian film industry (he wrote scripts for Bollywood, none of which were very successful) bumming cigarettes from friends and eve teasing to politics, politicians and partition riots. He wrote of his struggles with poverty and his inability to support his family as also of his brush with the law – he was tried a number of times for obscenity. Not once does he sound desperate or depressed. He writes with humour and a sharp satirical voice.

The ones I loved

One of my favourites was Hindi or Urdu where he sets up a dialogue between a Munshi Narayan Prasad and a Mirza Mohammad Iqbal each making a case for their language. The futility of the argument shines through in the dialogue. He adds: Languages are not created, they make themselves and no human effort can destroy one already made. He reduces issues like Arms Control to a hilariously simplistic level in his piece How Arms Control works. Another one I liked was What Bollywood must do. It is amazingly applicable today. Sample this: India needs entertaining movies that also educate, exercise the mind and introduces us to new ideas and new thinking.

I saved up my favourite one for the last – God is Gracious in Pakistan – a brilliant piece of satire where he professes relief that artists, poets, painters, musicians and even scientists had all been done away with for, Creation, as he says is the preserve of Allah. He is incisive in this derision of the Government that blocks out creativity.

How we need writers like him.

Swateek says

Bangalore Lit Fest 2016 introduced me to Manto via this book which Aakar Patel had a reading session. Since then I had this book on my to-read list. Few days back, a friend went on a Manto reading spree.. being jealous of how she was raving about it I decided to pick this up and start my own Manto journey, and I am super pleased I did.

This is a collected essay, and translated so well that you can actually listen to Manto in these writings. Thankfully, the author has given a context at the start of every writing that makes it easier to digest and set your mind according to what you would encounter in the piece.

As a writer, I see Manto was way ahead of his times. Take for example, a piece he wrote on the silver jubilee of Indian cinema is so very relevant today (and thankfully certain changes have been made which he would have liked) makes you like him even more. His critical pieces of Pakistan and the Muslim league can tickle your funny bone and you could easily say that he was an Indian trapped in the wrong country.

I look forward to reading every thing Manto very soon, starting with his short stories. A beautiful read!

Kritika Swarup says

I could relate to what Manto had to say about India. When he talks about his marriage, for instance, I can see it happening in that day and time. So when the intensity of the situation becomes grave as he discusses the conditions around and post partition, I take his words as true. Even though they are essays, they come alive. Each statement that he makes is weighted. His words are straight-forward. He questions without fearing authority. He accepts his mistakes with the same attitude. The way he expresses himself, I can identify him in the crowd around me and yet fail to muster the courage that he demonstrates, to demand a right to be an equal, thinking individual.

Manto comes forth as an important writer to me, personally. I have read very few accounts that sketch the struggle partition brought to the citizens. We hear about the struggle, but this is a 101 to witnessing that struggle beyond the textbooks, not just as an event, but as a driver of fate, change and struggle that contributes to the picture of the subcontinent, as we witness it today.

I would like to thank Manto for writing it and Aakar Patel for translating it. This needs to reach more and more young Indian readers who need to experience what the partition meant, to those who wrote about it and to those who were the part of the public that had to go by the political wind. It brings forward questions that our history books never raise, and answers, so weird and tentative, that our history books will never capture them; and yet, these are the real chunks of experience that should drive us to look at our history as an account of evolution of an entire nation and its equation with itself.

PS. As a disclaimer, since this is a translation, I am not sure what it lost or gained in the process. What follows is what I think of this translated and compiled edition as a read.

Shubham says

What a personality! simple, straightforward but heart-wrenching. Highly critical writing with a pinch of dark humor makes his writings a delight to read. You will swing like a pendulum while reading his essays as his brutal use of words shall humor you and at the same time bring your serious attention to relevant issue. Patel's translation is excellent whilst maintaining the tone and rhythm but it would be great to read his works in original for they would carry the mood also. Do not miss the essay on 'freeloaders' or what we say 'muftkhors' its hilarious :D.

Ashwin says

This is the first book of Manto, i have read in my life. I must say i am cursing myself for not reading his work till now. Even though i am sure, some of the charm might have lost in translating, Aakar Patel more or less brings Manto to English readers perfectly.

The great thing about this essays is, they are still relevant. Manto'S writings on Bombay is one of the best i feel. His essay on 25th Anniversary of Bollywood, "What Bollywood Must Do" is relevant even today. It seems like we have not moved on and history is repeating itself.

Manto's brilliance lies in simplifying subjects like arms race, religion and make it palatable to vast section of readers.

Must Read.

Anamika says

I had merely had a chance to explore Manto through his short-stories and partition sketches. Hence, this was a completely new experience for me, since here was Manto talking directly to his reader even as he presented a slice of his life and times in the 40s. The essays begin with a small introduction by the translator that help the readers to warm into the context of the piece, and if one has read Manto, then one is rather delighted to find the same kind of candour, and ironic fun that forms an integral part of his writing. He moves smoothly and seamlessly from the serious, to the ironic, to the satiric, to the poignant, to the romantic, to the idealistic. Worth a read for Manto fans.

Sadiq Kazi says

Classic Manto! Its amusing to read how some things haven't changed a bit in the last 60 years.

Kartik says

Of all the Indian authors I've read, Manto is one my top 3 favorites. After years of turning my head away from the cloying themes of small town life and spirituality that other Indian writers tend to push, an article in The Hindu alerted me to Manto's irreverent and (relatively much) darker style. I found a copy of The Bitter Fruit at the library and I became a fan after that.

While I've enjoyed a number of his short stories, reading his essays was different - But felt familiar at the same time. I got to see into the mind of this great writer and his thoughts on issues facing him in real life. His staunch humanism only made me respect him even more. The essays are on a wide range of subjects, from theocratic rule, to women's place in society, to marriage, and even firecrackers, and they carry themes of frustration, modernization, and even feminism.

The book ends with a long essay on the state of Bollywood, and its massive potential for expressing the spirit of the newly independent (and newly confident) India. Manto talks of the artistic integrity he finds missing in Bollywood, and the mediocrity of those involved in the industry. The trite cliches, the fumbled lines, the awkward casting, and the reductive character stereotypes. Is this what we can expect from a nation of millions of youths dreaming for a better tomorrow, he almost seems to ask the reader. This essay's my favorite of the bunch and shows lucid, piercing insights from someone actually in 'the biz'.

Not all of Manto's observations and opinions are fresh, relevant (I'm looking at the Partition ones here), or even interesting, but his wit saves the day even with the driest of essays. (One such example was Manto's review of a movie called Zindagi, which starts off long winded but leaves you chuckling heartily by the time you reach its end.) However, Aakar Patel's style of translation surprised me in one aspect. Words and even entire lines and verses in Urdu are left untranslated - Grave oversights, in my opinion. It was almost as if he assumed the readers would know Urdu themselves. Apart from that, the translation reads smoothly elsewhere.

Read with an open mind, this book of essays will entertain you, and show you just how little the middle class Indian psyche has changed from back then - Something hilarious in itself.

Apoorva says

Funny, short and very Manto.

Sindhu Jose says

"God is Gracious in Pakistan", for its stinging sarcasm. Manto at his best. This is just burn!

"Bombay During Partition", for its historical significance.

"Virtuous Women in Cinema", for its eloquent articulation of women's rights, on their place in society and cinema, and especially on Bollywood's hypocrisy and fake morality.

"A Review of Saigal's Zindagi", (a review of the movie Zindagi where Saigal played the lead role), for being hilariously funny that I actually laughed out loud!

Amit Tiwary says

***** REVIEW TO FOLLOW *****

Not all essays picked are great ones but enough to give a clear insight of head/heart of Manto saheb.

Satyajeet says

the translation seems randomly done, still it was enjoyable.

Sulaiman Taji says

Manto, one of the most highly celebrated writers of the Indian subcontinent who authored short stories primarily in Urdu.

This book is mostly a collection of short essays written both before and just after the partition. A lot of these essays would be a complementary read to his well known short stories, while some of them are more towards his other magazine writings and speeches. Rest are commentary/critique on the state of Pakistan. The book covers a range of topics like the administration/judiciary, movies, fundamentalism prevalent at the time, and the routine life in both Bombay and later in Pakistan among many others.

I had heard about Manto long back, but read his short stories just a year and a half back and instantly understood what the praise was about. His short stories have the charm of an easy approachability, yet are deep. This book covers the discourses of freedom of speech very nicely. The writing is overall sharp and consistently funny.

Two of the chapters stand out, namely “God is gracious in Pakistan”, and “What Bollywood must do”.

“God is gracious in Pakistan” (or its original and better name “Allah ka Bada Fazal Hai”) is the most unique form of writing here. It is part-satire, part-dystopia where the fundamentalists have taken over Pakistan; shutting down jails, courts, science, literature and other functionality of a nation. It shows, dare I say it, an exaggerated current-Pakistan. It proves again what a visionary Manto was. This piece invokes the Orwellian society of Nineteen Eighty-Four brilliantly. I was thoroughly amused.

“What Bollywood must do” is another great chapter as it deals with the Hindi film industry, and raises points and question which sadly exist even today (although I really despise the use of the word Bollywood in this book). It talks about the state of movies (and Talkies) at the nascent 25 years. This chapter shines in a book with great chapters, and has probably the most number of quotable passages from the book. Also, I finally understood why our elders didn’t think much good about movies (hookers and prostitutes were heavily involved back then!) Manto had an amazing understanding of movie plot/structures back then, comparing the Western cinema and the shortfalls in our own.

The biggest issue I had was the translation in English language here. The writing lost a lot of its charm, and I was mostly thinking what it would sound like in Urdu language. This was a huge let-down. Conversely, it

inspired me to pick up a Manto book in Urdu and start reading (I've never ready more than 4 consecutive lines in Urdu in my life). So, good luck to me with that.

Finally, I'd recommend this to people who would want to know how partition affected the normal people; also for the people who would like to know what effect Manto's writing had on the society then. Lastly, you can understand a little part of what it felt to be Manto.

Shadin Pranto says

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" I'm addicted to writing, just as I am to drinking. When I don't write, it feels like I'm unclothed, like I haven't had a bath. Like I haven't had my first drink".
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" Mr Nazir hired me for a salary of forty rupees a month. After he discovered that I was sleeping in the office, he began cutting two rupees from my salary towards rent every month."

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" After she had cried her fill, my mother asked me: 'Saadat, why don't you earn more money?' I replied: 'What will I do with more money, Bibi Jaan? What I earn is sufficient for me.' She said sternly: 'No. The reality is that you cannot earn more than you do. If you had been more educated, it would have been different.' That was true. But I had never been inclined towards studying. I failed in class twelve three times."
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"These people — "leaders" — see religion and politics as some lame, crippled man. They peddle him around to beg for money. They shoulder his corpse and appeal to those who will believe anything said from high on

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The expanse of his subjects - from personal conflicts, to international politics, to identity crisis, to movies - is awesome. The style is quintessential - frank, personal and relying more on content than fancy literary constructs.

My immediate thought on reading this - I do not know of the perfections or imperfections of other men. But I do know of my many imperfections. In fact, my imperfections are so lacking perfection that I do not know their entire expanse. Manto saab holds up a mirror to measure them against.