

Critical Analysis of the Urdu Short Story “The New Constitution” As a Colonial Tragedy

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Abstract: Saadat Hassan Manto (1912-1955) published his short story “The New Constitution in (1938). He is the most prominent and controversial short story writer in the history of Urdu fiction. The new Constitution written in the context of the Government of India Act 1935 is one of his representative short stories. The main character of this short story is Mangu Kochwaan. The people of the subcontinent, who were part of the British colonization for the past eighty-eight years and were, facing persecution, began to understand that the new constitution would bring about changes in their lives. Mangu Kuchwan represents this entire situation in the short story that ends with the tragedy that nothing has changes with the new constitution in the colonial system. This article critically analyzed the short story “the new constitution” as a colonial tragedy.

Keywords: The new constitution, Manto, Colonial Tragedy, Mangu, Short Story

Introduction:

The New Constitution (1938) is a short story written by the late Saadat Hassan Manto (1912-1955) who belonged to the subcontinent. The setting of this short story is in the city of the Lahore of the colonial period. Due to the unexpected arrival of East India Company in the main government, later taken charge by the British Government, the people of the subcontinent do not know how to react to the sudden socio-cultural changes that came into being with the new political structure.

This story reflects the political and social conditions of Indian society before the World War II. This period in the sub-continent was full of chaos and disorder. The British Raj had been dominating subcontinent’s government system directly since 1857 and in the 20th century, due to the awakening of political consciousness among the people, aspiration for independence began to increase. The British Raj in the subcontinent was weakening and anti-raj resistance and violence was on the rise. To reduce this political and social chaos, the

British Raj introduced the Government of India Act 1935 in the subcontinent. This act was taken by the innocent masses of the subcontinent as a whiff of fresh air.

It was being hoped that this act would bring about a major change in the socio-political life of the people of the subcontinent. Soon after the implementation of this act, people realized that this act did not bring any change in their lives. Everything was as it was going before the enactment of this act. This short story reflected that the British as a colonist had to face hate and resistance in united India because of their unjust racialism, colonialism and bigotry. British ruled the subcontinent for ninety years against the will of the native people. Like colonist, the rule of the British in the subcontinent was an ugly and undesirable specimen of cruelty, injustice and tyranny. Tahira Iqbal written in this context:

“Short Story “ The New Constitution” which reveals the tricks of the British colonialists to deceive the innocent people in their new colonies, which were called laws and rights, but actually these tactics to be used to strengthen their power and grip. This short story also satirizes the complacency and misunderstandings of an innocent public representative on the constitutional privileges of the India Act of 1935, which were granted to the subjects of India by the British rulers.”(1)

Objective:

The objective of this paper is to critical analyses an Urdu Short Story “*The New Constitution*” as a colonial tragedy of the sub-continent.

Research Question:

How to interpret the underlying meanings in the short story “*The New Constitution*” especially in the context of British colonialism (1857-1947) in the sub-continent?

Discussion:

The new Constitution written in the context of the Government of India Act 1935 is one of Manto’s representative short stories. The main character of this short story is Mangu Kochwaan. He lives in Lahore and is uneducated. All his information is derived from the words of the riders. He also stands out from the other kochwaans in his group because he is more politically conscious than others in his group or shows interest in politics. Mangu is one of the best characters portraying the innocence, sincerity and fervor of a common person. The incomplete knowledge and innocent faith in the crooked ways of colonist make him expect good,

progressive and revolutionary changes in his state though all of them prove wrong at the end. He is not just an individual character; he represents a whole class of naïve masses who are befooled through different promises. Muhammad Shafiq had written:

“In the process of being beaten by British officers, enduring their humiliating behaviors and then one day beating a white man, Mangu’s mental and emotional set-up is not only limited to him but becomes the language of every subjugated. Law on the one hand encapsulates the world scene and on the other reflects Indian society. Here helplessness and rebellion are mixed. Mangu becomes the symbol of the thinking of the whole epoch and the new law is the dream of this epoch.” (2)

He was self-righteous and naïve. His naivety can be gauged from the fact that he believed whatever he heard from the riders. The unique thing about this character is that he hates the British because he considered their presence on his land illegal and ominous. The biggest reason for his hatred was that the British used to persecute him a lot. They treated him as if he was an inferior dog. He often called them human monkeys. Besides, he did not like their color at all, whenever he saw their red and white faces, he felt nauseous:

“Ustaad Mangoo hated the British. They had imposed their currency here and they dealt with the native population harshly and unjustly. But the real reason why Ustaad Mangoo hated the British was the contempt with which the soldiers from the cantonment regarded him, treating him as if he was a dog. Also, he disliked their complexions; he felt nauseated whenever he saw their pink and white, heavily-lined faces. He used to say they reminded him of a corpse whose skin was slowly peeling off.”(3)

The attitude of British rulers and the gora soldiers deputed in the subcontinent aroused strong reaction in his heart. He hated them from his deepest heart. He even did not have a little part of likeness for them. He often said that they order Indians, as they were their father’s servants:

“An occasional brawl with a drunken gora had often ruined his day, and returning to the stand, he had smoked Hill cigarettes and cursed the British at length. “ Came to borrow fire and became masters!” he would say angrily, shaking his loosely turbaned head. “They have made our lives miserable, these sons of monkeys, ordering us around as though we are their fathers’ servants!” (4)

The hatred of Mangu was actually the hatred of every common citizen who was suffering the most in the British colonial system. In the colonial system, Mangu was the image of every helpless citizen who wanted to do something but was unable to do anything due to his local and inferior status in the society. He seemed helpless in the practical expression of his hatred towards the British. Therefore, he was looking for a system that could meet his expectations.

“I’m sick of catering to their every whim and need- the lat-sahebs! My blood boils when I see their faces. I wish a new law would come into existence so we could get rid of them. What relief that would be, believe me.”(5)

He was eager for the implementation of the new law. Coincidentally, after a few days, he finds two passengers from outside kachhari district, which are Marwaris. Mangu hears from them about the new law for the first time. Those who had come to court in connection with a civil case were overjoyed that the new law would come into effect from April 1, the first sign of which was that India would be free. He got from their conversation that this act was going to change the fate of Indian people who were suffering heavily under the burden of slavery and unwanted rulers.

The new constitution meant something completely new to him, completely different from the old one. He was hasty, so he was not only eager to see the practical formation of every cause but also curious. This habit had raised his expectations from the new constitution. This conversation further increased the importance of the new law in his heart. He began to think of it as something brand new and very shiny.

“The news of the new law had transported him to a different world. Putting aside every other thought, he focuses his attention on the implications of the new law that was to be enforced in Hindustan on April first. The question, “will it affect interest rates?” rang in his ears over and over again, and a wave of happiness engulfed him. “The bastards,” he muttered ecstatically, “the blood-suckers in the homes of the poor...the new law will boil them to death.”(6)

Among the characters depicted in the short story, the three different groups apart from the Mangu concerned with the new law. Marwaris are worried about land tax. The lawyers are worried about the federation while the students are thinking about their jobs, but Mangu is a character who dreams of complete freedom in his low knowledge.

The new constitution was no less than a mirage for the common Indian, for Mangu Kochwan. Political movements across the subcontinent had created an interest in politics even for a common person. He was also more interested in politics. Due to his interest, he had high expectations from the new constitution. He thought he would be completely free from colonial system after the new constitution implemented. In this joy, on the day of the implementation of the new constitution, he fought with a colonist. During the quarrel, when the people gathered, he was speaking loudly like this:

“Out of breath and frothing at the mouth, he saw the surprised faces of the people in the crowd and smiled. “ Their days of power are gone,” he addressed them in a quivering voice. “It’s the new law now...the new law!”(7)

It was surprising to him that the new law did not change anything. The colonial system was in force in the subcontinent as before. He got into a fight with a colonist in celebration of the new constitution, but ended up in police custody for the fight. Even during this time, he kept calling new constitution, new constitution. They silenced him by saying that there is no new constitution.

The new constitution was like a dream for the Mangu and the common Indian who hoped for their freedom, the dream of freedom from the cruelty, injustice and inequality of the British Raj, the dream of freedom from the colonial system. However, this dream ended with the tragedy of Mangu that nothing changed with the new constitution. Thus, this short story presents a colonial tragedy in which a common person suffering hardships in the colonial system dreaming freedom but that dream does not come true.

Conclusion:

Although, apart from Manto, other Urdu fiction writers have also written about colonial system but Manto’s writing regarding the colonialism are unique. Manto was the most successful writer among them because he has been critical of the role of colonist in the subcontinent. His criticism and creative work on colonialism has won almost internationally praise for its objectivity and style.

The new constitution is all about the dream of freedom, hatred, rebellion, revolution, collapse, chaos and confusion of peoples of the subcontinent that suffers at the hand of the British Raj arrived along with their socio-cultural and political system. The views about the socio- political system are very different that the colonists have. Shahzad Manzar writes regarding this:

“The new constitution is apparently the story of an uneducated kochwan, but Manto fills the story with various colors of hatred, rebellion, and revolution. Mangu kochwan grumbles against the British, but it seems as if the whole of India is grumbling.”(8)

The Short Story “The New Constitution” is the expression of the innocence, victimization and deprivation of the people in the political struggle of that era in the subcontinent. It is a story of a political character. Despite his Low political consciousness, Mangu’s emotions and feelings filled with patriotism and thus he emerges as a symbol of the sentiments of the Indian nation that wants to get rid of slavery.

Manto became the voice of the third world individual and identified the mindset of Western colonialism that deprived millions of minds of their basic right to live through the colonial system. The New Constitution also identifies the colonial forces that are taking away the freedom of the third world nations for their own interests and pushing them into the mire of slavery to achieve their nefarious goals.

This short story is reminiscent of human tragedy born in the colonial era; the tragedy of the freedom desire, which became the victim of the cunning and brutality of the colonial system. This tragedy has existed in every era and its severity has become more evident in the current era. Even today, people like Mangu who are suffering from simple social and political oppression are counting the days for political and social changes but their wait is not over.

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