

**The Fantastic as Frontier: Realism, the
Fantastic, and Transgression in
Mid-Twentieth Century Urdu Fiction***
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And apart from [Sukumar] Sen there was the group of distinguished writers who gathered for a time under Aurora's wing, Premchand and Sadat Hasan Manto and Mulk Raj Anand and Ismat Chughtai, committed realists all; but even in their work there were elements of the fabulous...

—Salman Rushdie¹

Introduction: Social Realism in South Asia

IN the twentieth century, prevailing models of literary criticism drew a line between realist and anti-realist literature, placing realist works on one side of the line and fantastic works on the opposite side. Recently, magical realist fiction has called into question this divide, as this literary mode blurs the line between realism and the fantastic. Postcolonial writers of Latin American, African, and South Asian literature who have decided to write in the fantastic mode have made a subversive choice to represent the world in a consciously non-Western way; in effect, they use

* I wish to thank Martha Ann Selby and S. Akbar Hyder for their insightful comments on an earlier draft of this article. I also wish to thank Kristen Rudisill for her help in locating the prefatory quote by Salman Rushdie. All errors, of course, are mine alone.

¹ *The Moor's Last Sigh* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995), p. 173.

the fantastic to question the notion of a single “real.”² Despite this inherent questioning of the boundaries and construction of reality, the international literary scene has been largely uniform in its placement of magical realism in the anti-realist category, thereby opposing it to realist fiction. Furthermore, the current critical climate furthers the division between realism and magical realism in the premium that it places on magical realism at the expense of the earlier social realist tradition, which is denigrated for producing artistically stunted narratives without any enduring aesthetic value.³

I believe that this hierarchical and oppositional division of social and magical realism into the categories of “real” and “anti-real” literature, respectively, is too simple and that this attitude of dismissal of social realist fiction must be understood within the context of the historical trends of literary criticism, as it goes hand-in-hand with the languishing of Marxist criticism since its apogee in the mid-1970s.⁴ I am not arguing that there is no difference between magical realism and social realism; on the contrary, I am in agreement with contemporary critics who argue that social realism and magical realism can be differentiated on stylistic grounds, and who believe that in many ways the social realist tradition has led to a conscious belittling of indigenous literary traditions, a problem that magical realist works have sought to remedy. I disagree, however, with those critics who have described the division between these two traditions in terms of the line between realism and anti-realism. What I want to argue is that realism and anti-realism should not be seen as opposites, but as qualities existing on a continuum, as I believe that reality cannot be separated so neatly from the fantastic. In this essay I want to demonstrate the need for rethinking such binaries as realism and fantasy, or social realism and anti-realism, by arguing that the fantastic is

²For a discussion of the definitions of magical realism, see, for instance, Brenda Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing With a Third Eye* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 1.

³See, for example, Harold Strauss’s article “Realism in the Proletarian Novel,” *Yale Review* 28 (1938), pp. 360–74. For an example of this writing-off of the aesthetic value of social realist works applied directly to Urdu literature, see Leslie Flemming and Tahira Naqvi’s *The Life and Works of Saadat Hassan Manto* (Lahore: Vanguard, 1985), esp. p. 24, and Carlo Coppola’s “Urdu Poetry, 1935–1970: The Progressive Episode.” Diss. University of Chicago, 1975.

⁴See Terry Eagleton’s “Afterword” in the 2nd ed. of *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

employed on certain occasions within South Asian social realist literature to contest the notion of a single “real.” The two social realist texts that I will examine are short stories which were written in Urdu and have been translated into English numerous times; the first is “Liḥāf” (“The Quilt”) by Ismat Chughtai, and the second is “Ṭōba Ṭēk Sīng^h” by Sa‘adat Hasan Manto.

The term “social realism” is a term that derives from Russian-inspired beliefs about the function of literature in a revolutionary socialist society. The international production of social realist fiction is characterized by a belief (now regarded as naïve) in the power of the word and in the writer’s ability to portray in a satisfying documentary fashion the structure of social reality. Social realism is inspired in various ways by the Russian revolution, Soviet communism, international Marxism, and the need to respond critically and in a denunciatory fashion to the various mechanisms of repression and the frustration of personal and collective aspirations.⁵ Urdu literature in India prior to the Mutiny of 1857 was usually not conceived of as having any instructive function beyond conveying to the initiated a sense of the beauty of life lived on a deeply sensitive emotional level. After 1857, however, Urdu literature underwent several significant transformations in terms of its form, content and purpose. At this time Muslim and Hindu socio-religious reform movements began to consider how to reform their cultural lives and religions in order to both recapture their respective ancient heritages and to realize their nationalist aspirations. During this time literature began to be understood as a means of promoting some social good,⁶ and by the early twentieth century, literature was understood as having a social as well as an aesthetic purpose. Also during this time European genres of fiction (the novel and the short story) and of poetry (blank and free verse) were absorbed into Urdu literature, dramatically changing the form of Urdu narrative and poetry. Furthermore, late nineteenth-century Russian writers had a strong influence on Urdu writers of this time, strongly impacting the content of Urdu literature, most notably in the shift of

⁵David W. Foster, *Social Realism in the Argentine Narrative* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 1986), pp. 13–4.

⁶For a discussion of this period of transition, see, for instance, Gail Minault’s *Secluded Scholars: Women’s Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India* (Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), especially the second chapter, “A Suitable Literature.”

focus away from the élite and towards the masses.⁷ Munshi Premchand was perhaps the first Urdu author to write European-style short stories. He believed that the standards of beauty needed to be changed, that literature should be an instrument of social reform, and explored with considerable realism social problems such as rural and urban poverty, the oppression of women, and the caste system.

It was the Progressive Writers' Movement, however, that most substantially influenced the form and content of Urdu literature in the twentieth century. The All India Progressive Writers' Association (AIPWA) held its first meeting in Lucknow in April of 1936, though it was actually founded in 1934 by Sajjad Zahir, Ahmed Ali, and several other Indian students in London. The two fundamental planks on which this movement rested were nationalism and the belief that literature should be a force for social uplift in India. The AIPWA published its manifesto in Premchand's journal *Hans* ("Swan") in October 1935. This manifesto is the most basic document in the development of social realism in India, setting forth basic definitions of the terms and goals of the AIPWA. The following is the definition of "Progressive literature" given in this manifesto:

It is our belief that the new literature of India must respect the basic realities of our present-day life, and these are the questions of our bread, plight, our social degradation and political slavery. Only then will we be able to understand these problems and the revolutionary spirit will be born in us. All those things which take us toward confusion, dissension, and blind imitation is [*sic*] conservative; also, all that which engenders in us a critical capacity, which induces us to test our dear traditions on the touchstone of our reason and perception, which makes us healthy and produces among us the strength of unity and integration, that is what we call Progressive.⁸

The Progressive Writers' Movement, although still in existence today, was severely weakened after 1947, with the independence of India and the birth of Pakistan. By 1950 the Progressive Writers' Movement had been challenged by other literary movements and was in decline as an effective

⁷Flemming and Naqvi, pp. 22–33.

⁸Carlo Coppola, "The All India Progressive Writers' Association: The European Phase," in *Marxist Influences and South Asian Literature*, ed. Coppola (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1974), p. 8.

literary force. By the 1960s, many Urdu writers had retreated from viewing literature as a force for nationalism and social reform.⁹ Hence the social realist movement was at its peak in India between 1930 and 1950, the same time when social realism had achieved a high degree of international prominence in Latin America and elsewhere.¹⁰

With its emphasis on the realistic depiction of such social problems as hunger and poverty, social backwardness, and political subjugation, Urdu social realist literature would hardly seem to contest reality or to allow for the opening up of a third space between reality and fantasy. For the most part, I would agree that Urdu social realist literature did not attempt to question the boundaries between reality and fantasy, as it was focused entirely on the accurate portrayal of empirical reality. However, like Salman Rushdie in the prefatory quote, I believe that there were Urdu authors who wrote in the social realist mode during this period between 1930 and 1950, but who turned, at times, to the fantastic as a means of questioning consensus reality. In what follows, I will attempt to apply Tzvetan Todorov's theory of the fantastic to two short social realist stories by Sa'adat Hasan Manto and Ismat Chughtai, in order to begin to deconstruct our understanding of the relationship between realism and fantasy.

Chughtai, Manto, and the AIPWA

Ismat Chughtai (1915–1991) and Sa'adat Hasan Manto (1912–1955) are two authors of Urdu social realist literature who share much in common, both in terms of the style and content of their writing, and in terms of their ambiguous relationship with the Progressive Writers' Movement. Both Chughtai and Manto were influenced by Soviet socialist literature and employed styles that were explicitly realistic in their representation of character and the human condition. However, both authors were also greatly influenced by Freud's work, which inspired them to write openly about aspects of human sexuality.¹¹ Ultimately it was this focus on sex-

⁹Flemming and Naqvi, p. 27.

¹⁰Foster, pp. 11–25.

¹¹Tahira Naqvi, "Introduction," *The Quilt and Other Stories* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1990), xiii and Fleming and Naqvi, p. 26. See also Prabhakar Machwe, "A Personal View of the Progressive Writers' Movement," in C. Coppola, ed., *Marxist Influences*, p. 50.

uality that alienated these two authors from the Progressive Writers' Movement, despite their continued devotion to social realism.

Ismat Chughtai was involved with the Progressive Writers' Movement from its beginning. In 1936, while completing her B.A., she attended the first meeting of the Progressive Writers' Movement in Lucknow.¹² There she met Rashid Jahan, one of the other leading women in the Progressive Writers' Movement. Between 1936 and 1942 Chughtai kept in contact with various members of the AIPWA, though she had not yet sought publication for much of her own writing. Manto was similarly involved with the Progressive Writers' Movement at the early stages of the movement and of his writing career, and his earliest short stories received praise from founding members of the AIPWA such as Ali Sardar Jafri.¹³

Gradually, however, the leaders of the Progressive Movement began to demand more ideological conformity from its members. From 1938 on, leaders attempted to force members both to espouse more seriously communist political beliefs and to write literature more nearly like Soviet socialist realist literature.¹⁴ In addition, from the early 1940s on, the leaders (especially Sajjad Zahir) also began to disavow any connection between Progressive and so-called "obscene" literature.¹⁵ This reference to obscenity was directed explicitly at Chughtai and Manto, who had been criticized heavily by critics outside the AIPWA for their stories which dealt with the subject of sexuality. Both Chughtai and Manto were officially charged with obscenity in 1942 and forced to undergo trial at the high court in Lahore. Chughtai was tried for her short story "Liḥāf" ("The Quilt"),¹⁶ Manto for his short story "Bū" ("Odor"). It was at this trial that Chughtai and Manto firmed up their friendship with one another; after their cases were dismissed they remained friends and friendly critics of each other's work. However, the AIPWA broke with each of these writers over the two stories and the ensuing obscenity trial. Chughtai reconciled

¹²Naqvi, p. x.

¹³Flemming and Naqvi, p. 28.

¹⁴On dissent within the AIPWA, see Ahmed Ali, "The Progressive Writers' Movement and Creative Writers in Urdu," in C. Coppola, ed., *Marxist Influences* and P. Machwe.

¹⁵Flemming and Naqvi, p. 26.

¹⁶For an English translation of an excerpt from Ismat Chughtai's autobiography, *Kāgāzī Hai Pairahan*, in which she recollects this trial, see the article "Autobiographical Fragments," trans. M. Asaduddin, in *Manushi* 110 (Jan.–Feb., 1999), esp. pp. 29–31.

herself with the AIPWA many years later; Manto never did.

Ismat Chughtai's "Liḥāf"

Ismat Chughtai's "Liḥāf" is the story of a frustrated housewife, Begum Jan, who is neglected by her nawab husband. She finds sexual and emotional solace in the companionship of Rabbo, a female servant. The narrator of the story is a woman who is recalling the week that she spent with Begum Jan as a child, hence the point of view from which the reader enters into the story is that of a nine-year-old girl. This story, which established Chughtai as a mature writer, illustrates her focus on themes directly related to women and their cultural status and role in Indian society. Her fiction is inhabited by women and children from the lower-middle class as well as the servant class. Tahira Naqvi characterizes her stories as explicitly realistic, stating that

Ismat depicts her characters realistically, using language that is so direct, colloquial and down to earth that her characters remain characters no longer, becoming instead people, real people we see every day and know well.¹⁷

There appears to be universal critical agreement that this story is a work of social realism. In fact, Ismat Chughtai's short stories are so rooted in social realism that Naqvi has argued that we may even view Chughtai's stories as sociocultural data which reveal valuable historical and ethnographic facts about the social and cultural aspects of life in North Indian Muslim families.¹⁸ Allow me, then, to attempt a Todorovian reading of this story, in order to determine whether there are any elements of the fantastic within this work of social realism.

The first line of "Liḥāf" reads: "In the depth of winter whenever I snuggle into my quilt, its shadow on the wall seems to sway like an elephant."¹⁹ This first sentence is significant, as it illustrates the three properties which Todorov sets forth as necessary for the structural unity of the fantastic narrative: the utterance, the speech act, and the syntactical

¹⁷Naqvi, p. xv.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. xvii.

¹⁹Ismat Chughtai, "The Quilt," in her *The Quilt and Other Stories*, trans. T. Naqvi, (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1990), p. 7. All subsequent references to this English translation will appear in parentheses in the text.

aspect. First, in the narrator's utterance that the quilt "seems to sway like an elephant," the author has employed "modalizing formulas" such as "he seemed" and "as if," which Todorov believes are found in all fantastic works.²⁰ Modalizing phrases such as these are commonplace throughout this short story.

Todorov also discusses two other elements of the utterance common to the fantastic: the literal realization of a figurative expression and the presence of exaggeration.²¹ Whereas this figurative expression of the quilt swaying like an elephant does not necessarily demand a literal interpretation, there are other instances of this within the text. For example, Begum Jan is said to "wilt with loneliness," an expression which initially seems to be a metaphor:

Nawab Sahib had a strange hobby. People are known to have irksome interests like breeding pigeons and arranging cockfights. Nawab Sahib kept himself aloof from these disgusting sports; all he liked to do was keep an open house for students; young, fair and slim-waisted boys, whose expenses were borne entirely by him. After marrying Begum Jan, he deposited her in the house with all his other possessions and promptly forgot about her! The young, delicate Begum began to wilt with loneliness. (p. 8)

However, it is quickly made clear that this expression is to be understood literally. First, we are told that Begum Jan cannot stop shivering, suggesting that she doesn't have enough flesh on her body:

In her household they [visiting relatives] equipped themselves for their winter needs. But, despite renewing the cotton filling in her quilt each year, Begum Jan continued to shiver, night after night. Each time she turned over, the quilt assumed ferocious shapes which appeared like shadowy monsters on the wall. (p. 9)

Finally, we are told that the Begum had grown so thin that she was about to completely disappear:

Rabbo came to her rescue just as she was starting to go under. Suddenly her emaciated body began to fill out. Her cheeks became rosy; beauty, as it

²⁰Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 80.

²¹*Ibid.*, pp. 77–9.

were, glowed through every pore! It was a special oil massage that brought about the change in Begum Jan. (p. 9)

Although the quilt-elephant relationship described in the first line of this story is not, like the expression of the Begum wilting, one that must be understood literally, it is, nonetheless, one of the other types of utterance mentioned by Todorov—that of exaggeration. Relating the quilt to an elephant suggests an enormous and therefore very scary presence in the bedroom with the narrator, especially when she regresses into her past and we see the elephant through the eyes of a nine-year-old girl.

After the utterance, Todorov turns to the speech act, noting that in stories of the fantastic the narrator habitually says “I.” Such internal narrators, he states, facilitate identification between the reader and the narrator-character, which creates an excellent condition for the appearance of the fantastic, allowing for surprise as the narrator-character, as a character, is able to lie to the reader.²² In the first sentence of this story the narrator uses the first person pronoun, asking the reader to identify with her and to recognize her as a character.

The third property which Todorov sets forth is the syntactical aspect. He states that the process of temporality is very important to the fantastic text, and that knowledge of the end of a fantastic narrative at the beginning distorts the whole function of the narrative. Without discussing the end of “Liḥāf” at this point, I want to note that temporality is important in this story. In this first line we are invited to identify with the narrator as an adult woman. This narrator-character quickly recedes, leaving us with her younger nine-year-old character, and only returns at the end of the story. This framing, I would submit, is indicative of the importance of temporality to this story.

While it is not feasible to attempt a line-by-line analysis of the story in this essay, I do want to trace the evolution of the quilt-elephant relationship throughout this story. The next mention of this relationship occurs on the first night that the nine-year-old character is staying at Begum Jan’s house: “At night I woke up with a start. It was pitch dark. Begum Jan’s quilt was shaking vigorously, as if an elephant was struggling beneath it (pp. 12–3). The young narrator-character tells Begum Jan that she is scared, and is told to go to sleep in response. She persists, asking if she can climb into Begum Jan’s bed. The Begum says no, and tells her

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 82–6.

again to go to sleep. But then there are whispers. Terrified, trying to imagine who else could be in the room, the narrator asks if there is a thief in the room. This time it is the servant Rabbo who answers, telling the girl to go to sleep.

The next night the young narrator-character is awakened by the sound of an argument between Begum Jan and Rabbo coming from the bed. She hears Rabbo sobbing, and then the sound of a cat slobbering in a saucer. Eventually, she goes back to sleep. On the third night the girl is again unable to sleep; she lies awake for hours before finally falling asleep. On the fourth and final night the quilt-elephant relationship is again brought up:

Later that night, Begum Jan's quilt was, once again, swinging like an elephant. "Allah," I was barely able to squeak. The elephant-in-the-quilt jumped and then sat down. I did not say a word. Once again, the elephant started convulsing. Now I was really confused. I decided, no matter what, tonight I would flip the switch on the bedside lamp. The elephant started fluttering once again, as if about to squat. Smack, gush, slobber—someone was enjoying a feast. Suddenly I understood what was going on!

Begum Jan had not eaten a thing all day and Rabbo, the witch, was a known glutton. They were polishing off some goodies under the quilt, for sure. Flaring my nostrils, I huffed and puffed hoping for a whiff of the feast. But the air was laden with attar, henna, sandalwood; hot fragrances, no food.

Once again the quilt started billowing. I tried to lie still, but it was now assuming such weird shapes that I could not contain myself. It seemed as if a frog was growing inside it and would suddenly spring on me.

"Ammi!" I spoke with courage, but no one heard me. The quilt, meanwhile, had entered my brain and started growing. Quietly creeping to the other side of the bed I swung my legs over and sat up. In the dark I groped for the switch. The elephant somersaulted beneath the quilt and dug in. During the somersault, its corner was lifted one foot above the bed.

Allah! I dove headlong into my sheets!!

What I saw when the quilt was lifted, I will never tell anyone, not even if they give me a lakh of rupees. (pp. 18–9)

This final sentence is the last line of the story. Here we approach a

crucial element of the fantastic as set forth by Todorov: the reader's hesitation. According to Todorov, the fantastic lasts only as long as the reader's hesitation between consensus reality and an alternate explanation:

The fantastic [is] a hesitation common to reader and character, who must decide whether or not what they perceive derives from "reality" as it exists in the common opinion. At the story's end, the reader makes a decision even if the character does not; he opts for one solution or the other, and thereby emerges from the fantastic. If he decides that the laws of reality remain intact and permit an explanation of the phenomena described, we say that the work belongs to another genre: the uncanny. If, on the contrary, he decides that new laws of nature must be entertained to account for the phenomena, we enter the genre of the marvelous.²³

In "Liḥāf," unlike most narratives, the hesitation is not resolved. In this unreconciled ambiguity, "Liḥāf" is similar to Charles Nodier's tale "Ines de las Sierras," discussed by Todorov, in which the narrator hesitates between two procedures: to break off his narrative (and remain in the fantastic) or to continue (and abandon it). His own preference, Nodier's narrator declares to his hearers, is to stop, with the following justification: "Any other outcome would be destructive to my story, for it would change its nature."²⁴ Here also the narrator refuses to finish her story, forcing the reader to choose between the "uncanny" conclusion that Rabbo and Begum Jan are under the quilt together engaged in sexual play, and the "marvelous" conclusion that under the quilt lies an elephant (or a cat or frog) constructed entirely from a nine-year-old girl's imagination.

Either conclusion can be seen as a challenge to consensus reality. Certainly, the marvelous conclusion that there is actually an elephant in the bed every night under the quilt defies reality as we know it. However, the uncanny conclusion that Rabbo and Begum Jan are involved in a female homoerotic relationship can also be said to defy consensus reality, in that lesbian relationships were not recognized as a possibility for desire in the dominant culture of 1940s India.

In differentiating between "themes of the self" and "themes of the other" in fantastic literature, Todorov posited that sexuality is the key difference between the two. Characterizing the supernatural as an experi-

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

ence of limits, he states that the literature of the fantastic illustrates several transformations of desire—which may not truly belong to the supernatural but rather to a social form of the uncanny—such as incest, supernumerary love, sadism, and homosexuality.²⁵ Lesbian desire, then, of the sort depicted in “Liḥāf” is “fantastic” in so far as it is a social form of the uncanny which contests consensus reality.

Although not phrased in the language of the fantastic, this is the conclusion reached by Gayatri Gopinath in her discussion of “Liḥāf” when she states that the partial knowledge of the girl’s gaze in this story is a tool which allows Chughtai to resist naming the women’s homoerotic relationship within prescribed frameworks. This resistance, she argues, is not a failure to articulate queerness, but an acknowledgment of the inadequacy of such articulation in expressing the range and complexity of nonheteronormative sexual practices and allegiances as they emerge within sites of extreme heteronormativity.²⁶ The fantastic, then, was employed by Chughtai as a means of contesting heteronormative consensus reality, and the ambiguous ending was a way of forcing the reader to make a choice between admitting to the existence of homoerotic desire or denying it and remaining imprisoned within the imagination of a nine-year-old girl.

Sa‘adat Hasan Manto’s “Toba Tek Singh”

Manto wrote “Ṭōba Ṭēk Siṅgh” in 1949, just after the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. It is about the exchange of insane asylum inmates following Partition—Hindus and Sikhs on the Pakistani side of the border were to be exchanged with Muslims on the Indian side. The story is set in an asylum in Lahore and gradually focuses on one elderly Sikh inmate named Bishan Singh, although he is more often called Toba Tek Singh because he had been a landowner in a village by that name. This story is one of several stories written by Manto about Partition, and it has received wide acclaim in both South Asia and the West for its realistic

²⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 126–32. In addition, Todorov states on pp. 147–8 that themes of the other are based on “excessive” acts linked to sexual desire. In “Liḥāf,” one might also note the excessive amount of massaging that occurs throughout the story.

²⁶Gayatri Gopinath, “On Fire,” *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies*, 4.4 (1998), p. 634.

depiction of that experience. In fact, Gyanendra Pandey argues that this story is so clearly a social realist story that it may even be regarded as historical writing. Pandey argues that histories since the nineteenth century have been largely national histories, and have therefore tended to wipe out many signs of struggle and violence that marked the way to their own success. By regarding stories like “Ṭōba Ṭēk Sīngh” as historical writing, Pandey argues that we can frame histories in order to allow a place for the bodies that carry the marks of everyday struggles, and which thereby constitute the “larger” events and processes of History.²⁷

The first paragraph of this short story questions the sanity of the decision to exchange “insane” Indians and Pakistanis:

Two or three years after Partition, it occurred to the governments of India and Pakistan that along with the transfer of civilian prisoners, a transfer of the inmates of lunatic asylums should also be made. In other words, Muslim lunatics from Indian institutions should be sent over to Pakistan, and Hindus and Sikhs from Pakistani asylums should be allowed to go to India.²⁸

Manto then follows up these lines with the ironical question, “Who knows if this decision was sensible or not?” (p. 281). From the very beginning, then, the reader is aware that this is a story about sanity and insanity, and about the boundary between the two. Are the Indian and Pakistani governments really sane? Are the inmates really insane?

According to Todorov, there are two possible locations of hesitation in the fantastic: between the real and the *illusory*, and between the real and the *imaginary*. In the first case, the character is certain that the events occurred, but is not certain that their understanding of them is correct. In the second case, the character wonders if what they believe they perceive is not in fact a product of the imagination. In this latter case in which the hesitation occurs between the real and the imaginary, Todorov states that madness is the most effective tool for creating ambiguity.²⁹ Throughout “Ṭōba Ṭēk Sīngh,” Manto employs madness in order to create hesitation

²⁷Gyanendra Pandey, “The Prose of Otherness,” *Subaltern Studies VIII* (Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 213–21.

²⁸This translation is by Tahira Naqvi and appears in Flemming, p. 281. All subsequent references to this English translation will appear in parentheses in the text.

²⁹Todorov, pp. 36–7.

between the real and the imaginary. Bishan Singh (and the implicit reader) is kept in doubt, uncertain if the insane asylum—previously located in India—has now moved to Pakistan. How could such a move be possible? And what does this mean for Toba Tek Singh, his village? There is doubt about the actuality of the event, coupled with the suggestion that perhaps it is merely a product of the inmates' madness. For instance, one inmate, believing himself to be God, felt that he was in charge of determining which village was parceled out where:

In the lunatic asylum was a man who believed he was God. Bishan Singh asked him about Toba Tek Singh. The man laughed raucously. "It is neither in Pakistan nor in Hindustan," he said, "because I haven't given any orders yet." (p. 285)

Although the reader—who presumably knows that Partition was an actual event and not a product of the imaginary—knows more than the main character in the story, the reader is asked to suspend his or her disbelief in order to identify with Bishan Singh, thereby allowing for a reconsideration of sanity and insanity in this situation.

In order to further this identification with Bishan Singh, he is presented initially as an insane person. However, his insanity is consistently eroded throughout the story. We are first introduced to Bishan Singh in this way:

A Sikh who had been in the asylum for fifteen years used to mutter constantly to himself. "Oper di gur gur di, anx di, bay dhiana di, mung di daal di, of di laltain," he kept saying over and over again. He slept neither at night nor during the day. According to the guards, he had not slept at all in fifteen years. He did not lie down either. Sometimes he leaned against a wall. (pp. 283–4)

This paragraph highlights several aspects of the "themes of the self" discussed by Todorov. Such themes of the self include childhood, the drug experience, mysticism, and madness, all of which collapse the limit between subject and object or matter and mind.³⁰ Language—or the lack of it—plays an essential role in each of these themes of the self. According to Todorov, this is because the essential event which provokes the shift from the primary mental organization to maturity is the subject's

³⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 117–20.

accession to language. Through language the child is capable of understanding time; prior to the acquisition of language the child has no sense of past or future, only an eternal present. This situation is comparable to that of the psychotic (or the mystic or drug user), who experiences an inarticulate world and a fluid conception of time. The psychotic rejects communication and inter-subjectivity, and this renunciation of language leads the psychotic to live in an eternal present. In the place of the common language, the psychotic establishes a “private language” or an anti-language. Words borrowed from the common lexicon receive new meanings, which the psychotic keeps individual: it is not simply a matter of varying the meaning of words, but of preventing words from effecting an automatic transmission of this meaning.³¹

In the passage cited above, Bishan Singh is described as constantly muttering to himself the gibberish phrase “Oper di gur gur di, anx di, bay dhiana di, mung di daal di, of di laltain,” suggesting that he truly has established his own private language, and has thereby rejected communication and intersubjectivity. Through the use of this anti-language, coupled with the supernatural statement that Bishan Singh never sits nor sleeps, this paragraph successfully conveys the notion that Bishan Singh is insane and rightly belongs in the asylum. In addition, we are told a few paragraphs later that it is apparent that Bishan Singh is impervious to the passage of time (p. 284). As Todorov suggests, the psychotic in this story lives in an eternal present, unaware that he has been standing and muttering to himself for fifteen years.

Yet, is this really the case? Immediately after we are told that Bishan Singh is impervious to the passage of time we are given cause to doubt this fact:

It was apparent he was impervious to the passage of time. But he waited for the visit from his relatives and was ready for them when they came. Before their arrival he would tell the guard his “visit” was coming; he bathed, scrubbed his body with soap, oiled his hair and combed it, put on his best clothes which he had reserved for this occasion, and then went to see his visitors. (pp. 284–5)

Hence while Bishan Singh may not be aware that fifteen years have passed, he is certainly aware of the passage of months, and waits for the monthly visit of his family. When this visit ceases due to his family’s

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 145–7.

migration to India during Partition, Bishan Singh becomes troubled. When the “little voice in his heart” which told him when his family was coming is silenced, he begins asking people in the asylum where Toba Tek Singh is. Again, we must doubt whether Bishan Singh is really insane—after all, he is apparently able to tell time and then even demonstrates his ability to speak coherently. When Fazal Din, a Muslim friend of the family, comes to visit Bishan Singh in the asylum, they hold this conversation:

“Where is Toba Tek Singh,” he [Bishan Singh] then asked Fazal Din.

“Where is Toba Tek Singh?” Fazal Din repeated in amazement, adding, “Where it was before.”

“Is it in Pakistan or Hindustan?” Bishan Singh asked.

“In Hindustan... well, no, no, in Pakistan, I think.” Fazal Din became flustered. (p. 286)

In this conversation any conception that the reader may have had of Bishan Singh as an insane man, one who is unable to comprehend events or conversations, breaks down. Clearly, he is aware that two countries have been created and that his village has somewhat arbitrarily been placed in one nation or the other; furthermore, he is aware that most people are as uncertain as he about the practical details of the division of India.

The ending of this story further reinforces this questioning of the boundary between sanity and insanity. While the process of transferring the inmates across the border is going on, Bishan Singh approaches a border guard and again asks: “Where is Toba Tek Singh? In Pakistan or in India?” The guard replies, laughing: “In Pakistan.” On hearing this Bishan Singh runs back away from the border, towards Pakistan. The guards pursue him, trying to force him back to the checkpoint, but Bishan Singh resists, yelling “Toba Tek Singh is here!” The authorities then try to assuage him, telling him that Toba Tek Singh is now in Hindustan, and that if it’s not there yet, then they’ll send it to him immediately. But Bishan is no looney who can be fooled so easily. He plants himself in a place between the borders and refuses to budge. Thinking him harmless, the guards decide to leave him there and proceed with the transfer of the others. The last paragraph of the story reads:

Before the sun rose, a piercing cry emitted from Bishan Singh who had been quiet and unmoving all this time. Several officers and guards ran towards him; they saw that the man who, for fifteen years, had stood on

his legs day and night, now lay on the ground, prostrate. Beyond a wired fence on one side of him was Hindustan and beyond a wired fence on the other side was Pakistan. In the middle, on a stretch of land which had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh. (pp. 287–8)

The ending of this story is significant in that it collapses the distinction between subject and object, between mind and matter, in two respects. First, this is in its way an ambiguous ending, in which “Toba Tek Singh” comes to refer to both man and place. Leslie Flemming notes that the final phrase “lay Toba Tek Singh” can refer to both the man nicknamed Toba Tek Singh stretched out on the ground and to the piece of ground itself, which has become for him the place Toba Tek Singh, where he most wants to be. Thus, in his death, he has finally reached his home in Toba Tek Singh.³² I would submit that the ending is even more ambiguous than Flemming suggests, in that it does not clearly state that Bishan Singh has died, and hence the possibility exists for multiple interpretations of this ending. And perhaps this ambiguity is intentional, meant to complement the liminal position that Toba Tek Singh (a.k.a. Bishan Singh) is in at the end of the story—both man and place, located at the border between India and Pakistan, and perhaps also somewhere between life and death.

Second, this ending invites the reader to question consensus reality. Who is sane and who insane? Is Bishan Singh really insane for wanting to remain in Pakistan where his native village was? Are the governments of India and Pakistan really sane for splitting one country into two and then transferring criminals, hospital patients, and asylum inmates across the border? Gyanendra Pandey states that Manto seems to offer a resolution of the paradox that he sets out at the beginning of this story through the suggestion that, in this time of “madness,” it was only the “insane” who retained any sanity.³³ Here the fantastic has been employed—in the form of madness, one of the “themes of the self” set forth by Todorov—by Manto in order to cause the reader to question the consensus reality surrounding Partition.

³²Flemming, p. 84.

³³Pandey, p. 219.

The Fantastic as Frontier

Todorov argued that the fantastic is not a genre but instead occupies the duration of the uncertainty between the uncanny and the marvelous genres. He states that the fantastic in its pure state is a median line separating the uncanny from the marvelous; it is “a frontier between two adjacent realms.”³⁴ Furthermore, Todorov not only discusses the spatial liminality of the fantastic, he also resituates the spatial as a temporal disruption, stating that the hesitation which characterizes the fantastic cannot be situated, by and large, except in the present.³⁵ It is this conception of the fantastic as a spatial and temporal frontier that allows for a more radical reading of Todorov, one which opens up the fantastic to a fuller theorization of the workings of the fantastic as the discourse of the limit. Lucie Armitt is one scholar who has recognized this potential. She states:

Precisely because the fantastic comes to the fore at the point of interaction between two conflicting worlds/zones/modes, the resulting narrative is always to a greater or lesser extent on the edge between the two, simultaneously acknowledging both, simultaneously cutting across both,... shifting the relations between them through its indeterminacy. As far as Todorov is concerned, whereas the marvelous and the uncanny might be perceived as spatial enclosures, the realm of the fantastic takes up no space at all. Instead it demarcates frontier territory.³⁶

Most academic work on frontiers has been in the discipline of history, where the frontier has long been understood as a broad zone in which two societies encounter each other. For instance, Cynthia Talbot has discussed the medieval Hindu-Muslim encounter as a process occurring in an open frontier zone in which neither side had complete hegemony. She characterizes the Hindu-Muslim frontier as an advancing zone of military conflict, and argues that in such frontier conditions large-scale destruction of sociopolitical networks is common, resulting in widespread uncertainty and feelings of crisis. At the same time, she states, because of the rapid change occurring in the frontier setting, new sociopolitical

³⁴Todorov, p. 44.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 42.

³⁶Lucie Armitt, *Theorising the Fantastic*, (London and New York: Arnold-Hodder Headline Group, 1996), p. 32.

groups are coalescing. Hence, frontiers are prime settings for ethnogenesis—for the formation of new ethnic identities. Her basic argument is that identity formation is not a static process; rather, it is in frontier zones that identity is constructed.³⁷

What I am positing is that the fantastic be understood not as a physical frontier, but as an ideological one which functions similarly as an open zone in which alternate conceptions of reality clash and identity is constructed. This formulation of the fantastic does not limit it to genres in which the supernatural is present; rather, it is the ground where the uncanny and the marvelous battle, where scientific reality and fantasy clash, and where dominant culture and countercultures compete.

There are two important and interrelated results of understanding the fantastic as a zone rather than as a genre. First, understanding the fantastic as a zone or an open frontier allows for the active resisting of generic reductionism and hence encourages the examination of fantastic tropes within a wide range of literature, including works of social realism. Lucie Armitt has described the first benefit of this strategy:

[I]t is becoming increasingly possible to challenge the assumption that we need understand the position or indeed the identity of fantasy in terms of unimagined either/or choices (marvelous or fabulous, space opera or sword and sorcery, fable or myth). Now we can look at the fantastic as a form of writing which is about opening up subversive spaces within the mainstream rather than ghettoizing fantasy by encasing it within genres. In the process it also retains its important subversive properties without capitulating to classification.³⁸

The second important result of understanding the fantastic as a zone or frontier rather than as a genre, as alluded to in the above quote from Armitt, is that it allows for the literary exploration of sociopolitical transgressions. If the fantastic is an open and non-containable zone, then it poses a dangerous threat to established notions of fixity and conformity, a characteristic that makes the fantastic a particularly appealing tool for the exploration of sociopolitical marginality and ex-centricity.³⁹ Rosemary

³⁷Cynthia Talbot, "Inscribing the Other, Inscribing the Self: Hindu-Muslim Identities in Pre-Colonial India," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 37.4 (1995), pp. 692–722.

³⁸Armitt, p. 3.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 33.

Jackson is one scholar who has developed this concept of the fantastic as the literature of subversion. She also theorizes the fantastic as a frontier zone, stating that “the fantastic exists in the hinterland between ‘real’ and ‘imaginary,’”⁴⁰ and argues that the relationship that the fantastic has with “the unsaid and the unseen... that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made ‘absent’” renders it particularly well-suited as a mode for representations of sociopolitical subversion.⁴¹

Interestingly, Michel Foucault’s definition of “transgression” is very similar to Todorov’s definition of the “pure fantastic”:

Transgression is an action which involves the limit, that narrow zone of a line where it displays the flash of its passage... [and] incessantly crosses and recrosses a line which closes up behind it in a wave of extremely short duration, and thus it is made to return once more right to the horizon of the uncrossable.⁴²

As Armitt has pointed out, these two concepts—transgression and the fantastic—share the same location (a median line, a non-space between two spaces) and a similar trajectory (a brief pattern of transition, crossing).⁴³

This correspondence between transgression and the fantastic is not just a structural one; it is also manifest on the level of content. Ismat Chughtai’s short story “Liḥāf” is a confrontational challenge to and encounter with societal taboos. It is set within the *zenana*, the women’s quarters which are the heart of the private residence, and engages what is most private—and therefore what is most invisible, most silenced—in this realm: sexuality. Yet while engaging female homoeroticism, the author simultaneously employs the fantastic to refrain from naming or showing what actually goes on under the quilt. This use of fantastic ambiguity subverts the reader’s gaze, forcing the reader to make his own choice between admitting to the existence of lesbian sexuality (the “uncanny”) or denying it as the elephantine product of a nine-year-old

⁴⁰Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 35.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴²Michel Foucault, “A Preface to Transgression,” *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Interviews and Essays* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 33–4. See also Armitt, pp. 33–4.

⁴³Armitt, *Ibid.*

girl's runaway imagination (the "marvelous").

Lucie Armitt describes this positioning of the reader in the following way:

The reader of a fantastic narrative is projected into a precarious positionality which must inevitably challenge the reader's sense of gratification in reassuring forms and force her to confront the ease with which apparently established limits of all kinds may be transgressed. The very fact that the concerns of transgression lie with the liminal position and the threshold which is forced, implies in itself that our response to the free play of transgression may often be tentative, equivocal and perhaps even fearful. Nevertheless, the positive side of this is, as W.R. Irwin argues, that the fantasist: "may really hope that his story will have some lasting effect of modifying the way in which his readers accept the norm that he has playfully violated." In reading the fantastic, we pay a price, swapping our comfortable and familiar resolutions for a narrative identification which is "open," dissatisfied, endlessly desiring.⁴⁴

The reader of "Liḥāf" is similarly left unsatisfied, desirous of a resolution. But resolution, which is not forthcoming in the story, can only be attained when the reader confronts consensus, heteronormative reality with the fact of the existence of homoeroticism.

Sa'adat Hasan Manto's short story "Ṭōba Ṭēk Siṅg^h" is also a confrontational challenge to and encounter with societal taboos. Like "Liḥāf," "Ṭōba Ṭēk Siṅg^h" is similarly located in a realm that is invisible and silenced in the public sphere: the psychiatric hospital, or "insane asylum." Bishan Singh is initially presented to the reader as the caricature of insanity: he speaks gibberish, never sits or sleeps, has matted hair and is filthy. However, this notion of insanity is eventually defamiliarized as the reader increasingly identifies with Bishan Singh, who increasingly becomes the picture of sanity in an insane world. The conclusion of this story also leaves the reader desirous of resolution: Is Bishan Singh alive or dead? Where is Toba Tek Singh? Did the transfer of the patients proceed? The readers are left in a liminal position, hovering between India and Pakistan, life and death, sanity and insanity. Again, the readers can only find resolution by resolving the ambiguity they are presented with through the confrontation of consensus, "sane" reality with the fact of the existence of "insanity" which goes by the name of Partition.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 35–6.

Conclusion: Social Realism, the Fantastic and Transgression

To summarize, I have argued that Ismat Chughtai's story "Liḥāf" and Sa'adat Hasan Manto's story "Ṭōba Ṭēk Siṅḥ" are fantastic in two ways: they each employ the reader's hesitation between consensus and alternate reality as set forth by Tzvetan Todorov, and they are each stories that transgress and subvert consensus reality as set forth by Rosemary Jackson and Lucie Armitt. Although there are more definitions of the fantastic than it is feasible to recount, I would like to set forth one further definition here. Kathryn Hume's definition is perhaps the widest possible one, as it allows for multivalent aspects of the fantastic (as variously defined) to be encompassed. Her definition is that "*Fantasy is any departure from consensus reality.*"⁴⁵

The question that must be asked is whether such a broad definition of the fantastic is useful, or whether it in effect renders the fantastic meaningless, allowing literature of any sort—even social realism—to be incorporated under the rubric of the fantastic. In order to answer this question I believe it is necessary, once again, to turn to Tzvetan Todorov, for it is his crucial distinction between "fantasy" as genre fiction and "the fantastic" as an anti-generic mode that opens his theory to the potential of criticism, allowing for all literature to be read and analyzed with an emphasis on transgression. Rather than arguing that "the fantastic" must be discarded as a concept that is too extra-generic, then, I am arguing instead that "the fantastic" is actually quite precise: it is a median line between two realities. That is, I want to retain the structure of Todorov's idea of "the fantastic" as a spatial and temporal frontier; a non-space that exists only in the present. Furthermore, I believe that "the fantastic" is essentially a mode for sociopolitical subversion, for the transgression of consensus reality.

When defined in this way, I believe that the fantastic can be understood to be present within some works of social realism, as I hope the above analyses of "Liḥāf" and "Ṭōba Ṭēk Siṅḥ" have demonstrated. But not all social realist literature can be said to incorporate the fantastic. In fact, I believe that the majority of twentieth-century Urdu social realist literature does not employ the fantastic. Munshi Premchand's "Ṭḥākūr kā

⁴⁵Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1984), p. 21, emphasis original. See also Susan Napier, *The Fantastic in Modern Japanese Literature: The Subversion of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 9.

Kū'ān" ("The Thakur's Well") and Rashid Jahan's "Dillī kī Sair" ("A Trip to Delhi"), for instance, do not involve the reader's hesitation nor ask the reader to choose between two realities. Rather, these stories set out to describe to the reader in a realistic manner the daily hardships of marginalized groups such as lower castes and women.

But many other important Progressive Urdu short stories do involve the reader's hesitation, such as Khadija Mastur's "Lāla-e Şeĥrā'ī" ("Flame of the Desert") in which the reader must decide whether Shamim has been engaging in an illicit love affair, or whether the affair is in fact only the fantasy of a young woman crazed with the intensity of her desire. And Manto's "Mantra" plays with spiritual ambiguity, leaving it up to the reader to decide whether a young boy named Ram is a god or merely a human trickster. Significantly, the themes of these social realist stories which employ the fantastic are limited in number: sexuality, insanity, and spirituality crop up again and again.

Sexuality, insanity, spirituality. These themes are significant for two primary reasons, the understanding of which can lead towards a deeper understanding of the relationship between realism and the fantastic. First, these themes, more than perhaps any others, question the self/other boundary and are, therefore, frontier material. Sexual desire seeks union between oneself and another being, the merging of two into one, but simultaneously requires the existence of an other in order for that very desire to exist. Insanity frequently places the self at the center of the world; all others exist in relationship with that self in a pan-determinism perceived only by the self. And spirituality asks that the self ultimately be understood as part of a larger otherness in which all things become one, yet often refuses to grant such oneness until after death. Each of these themes deconstructs (in the sense set forth by Derrida) the self/other binary, positing one as a "supplement" to the other, illuminating the point of differentiation between the two, and thereby collapsing the difference between them.⁴⁶ Through the deconstruction of the self/other binary implicit in these themes, then, an ideological frontier is evoked and the potential for the construction of new identities and realities arises.

Second, these three themes are significant in that they are precisely the themes of the fantastic listed by Todorov in his discussion of themes

⁴⁶See Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 85–225.

of the self and other.⁴⁷ In his discussion of the social function of the fantastic, Todorov argues that sexuality, insanity, and spirituality are the themes of the fantastic because they are directly related to societal taboos. He states:

The fantastic permits us to cross certain frontiers that are inaccessible so long as we have no recourse to it. Summarizing the supernatural elements, as previously enumerated, we shall see the justice of this observation. Take, for example, the “themes of the other”: incest, homosexuality, love for several persons at once, necrophilia, excessive sensuality... It is as if we were reading a list of forbidden themes, established by some censor: each of these themes has often been banned as a matter of fact, and may still be so in our own day.⁴⁸

He adds:

If the group of themes of the other derives directly from taboos and hence from censorship, the same is the case for the network of themes of the self, though less directly. It is not an accident that this group refers us to madness.⁴⁹

According to Todorov, the social function of the fantastic is to exempt the text from the action of the law, and thereby to transgress that law.⁵⁰

Social realist literature does not only seek to depict reality; it also seeks to revolutionize society. At times this idealism is apparent in works of social realism, especially in works which address societal taboos, and

⁴⁷Todorov also discusses the drug experience, see pp. 107–39, which I have not listed here as I have not included in my discussion any Urdu literature dealing with this topic, due only to spatial constraints. N.M. Rashid’s poem “Sharābī,” Faiz Ahmed Faiz’s *ghazal* “Āyē Kučh Abd Kučh Sharāb Āyē,” and Tasneem Farooqi’s poem “Naẓar Naẓar sē Milākar Sharāb Pitē Haiñ,” are among many poems dealing with the topic of alcohol that would be worthy of future study in this respect. As Victor Kiernan has pointed out about twentieth-century Urdu poetry, “poetically wine stood for exaltation, inspiration, and the tavern was the abode of truly heart-felt spiritual experience as opposed to the formal creed of the mosque. Drunkenness and madness are near allied...” See his “Introduction” in V.G. Kiernan, ed., *Poems by Faiz* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1971), esp. p. 35.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. 158.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, p. 159.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*

therefore discuss the themes of sexuality, insanity, and spirituality. For in these three themes the self/other binary is contested and new identities are constructed. Identity construction is not static; it is produced in frontier zones where different conceptions come into contact and often clash. Hence frontier zones are where consensus reality—the dominant culture—is questioned. And the fantastic is such a frontier. Therefore, when social realist authors have sought to not only depict empirical reality, but also to question hegemonic culture and its conceptions of identity, they have, at times, employed the fantastic. Ismat Chughtai and Sa'adat Hasan Manto are two such social realist authors who have made use of the fantastic in their short stories in order to question the notion of a single “real” and to force the reader to make a choice between consensus reality and a larger, more inclusive definition of reality, one which has room for alternate ways of desiring, of thinking, of speaking, and of being. □

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