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Manto's Women: Reeking Tales of Partition

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Abstract

Saadat Hasan Manto was an ace of a short story Urdu writer of the twentieth Century. He had contributed with his astounding writings which hold its relevance till date. Being an iconoclast he was able to break the clichéd shackles of the traditional writing and pave way for progressive Urdu writing. His essays, stories, deliberations and contemplations leave an indelible imprint in our minds and thus we times and again keep turning back the pages of history and bask in his reeking tales of partition filled with unwavering honesty. His tales such as *A Woman's Life*, *Mozail* and *Colder Than Ice* recorded the mayhem that lay latent behind the threads that people put on. His characters had their own individualistic domain who stood upright in the most impoverished and deplorable conditions of their time. Manto had used women as the most powerful tool to show the unleashed barbarism that was reigning naked during the clamor of 1947. Women strongly expressed dissent to remain subjugated and suffer from hushed deceit.

Keywords – *iconoclast, progressive, mayhem, barbarism, dissent.*

Manto is the most misunderstood and condemned writer of his times. People considered him to be coarse and offensive as his texts gave refuge to the glaring truths and tortures that the society met out with women. He had to face court trials and debasements for the same. But he did not slip off the track that he had decided to embark upon with fire in his heart. His stories presented the prostitutes somewhere as the daughter, sister, and mother, beloved or as a wife. He portrayed the real truth lurking behind the harsh reality that these women deserved equal respect, love and affection as any other belonging to the society. Manto's idea reflected cohesion with that of Mitchell J. Wood, who states how "the feminist movement waged legal battles and cultural wars that are specifically body centered, focusing on the right of women to control their bodies in such areas as abortion, rape, domestic violence, and media imagery".¹ His stories wear a garb of those marginalized voices with clamor emitting from each creek and crevice.

Looking into the dynamics of societal marginalization of women through his story *A Woman's Life*, one would encounter Saugandhi, a prostitute who is portrayed as a woman with an emotional edge. Saugandhi fantasized dwelling in a world where her unending demand for love would be answered and thus in reality she shades herself to the lie uttered by her male customers and rather melts like wax in return. Manto here brings out the sensitive shade of a woman even though she has been unnerved by the society because of the rank she belongs to.

The narrative unfolds in a way where she gets decked up for her customer, who on encountering her is filled with abhorrence. This insult which she experiences creates a crisis which whirlpools within her. The anxiety of this rejection leaves her with an excruciating pain and thus, she pines for the entire scene to be replayed so that:

"she, Saugandhi, would scratch that Seth's face with her long nails ,
pull him out of that car by his hair and hit him till she broke down exhausted." ²

She thus makes her mind to come out of the vicious circle and set herself free from the clutches of filth and torture. As a result she lashes out Madho, who is both her lover and an extortionist and so breaks free from the need of approval from the male dominion. The internal monologue which she indulges in later on makes her confront her own existential agony thus leading her to embark on a journey where she is able to strip herself naked and see through the stark reality in which she was encompassed with.

Dr. S.Z Abbas³ looked at Manto's writings on prostitution as an establishment created by men in the social array where women are treated and traded like commodities. Through Manto's short story *A Woman's Life* he analyses the theory that 'one is not born a woman but becomes a woman', by famous philosopher Simone De Beauvoir.⁴ In *The Second Sex*, her most famous work, de Beauvoir outlines a kind of existential history of a woman's life: a story of how a woman's outlook towards her body and bodily functions alter over the years, and of how society influences this attitude to a large extent. Writers like Beauvoir believed that women should get the free space to prosper. She feels that natal facts need not be harrowing: the agony and anxiety arises due to lack of generosity and accountability in man's sexual behavior combined with the dread of women of always being objectified before a belligerent sexual gaze of man. Manto knew that prostitutes are not born rather they are made. The whole society that shuts the door to a whore but keeps the door unfastened for the men who visit them.

Manto's female characters are rebellious and virtuous even when their circumstances are mixed in taboo and social marginalization. They emerge from different backgrounds and form a clear conduit for Manto's humanism. In the story *Colder than Ice* Kalwant Kaur is a fervent lady, who lives in locality of Punjab. She is a bold and dynamic. She lives with Iswar Singh, who is the protagonist of the story. The setting of the story is somewhere in pre-partition subcontinent, during annihilation of Muslims. Iswar Singh is an illiterate, murderer, a trapeze, pillager type of a Sikh. Both are well built and are brawny. This story basically grows up in the ambience where communal riots are raging naked. This story is an announcement regarding the psychological ordeal that people lived through during partition. The story also smudges the thin line which exists between nationalism and aggressive jingoistic insanity. Iswar Singh

represents all those who, in the name of nationalism, engaged in remorseless killing and diabolical madness. On being confronted by Kalwant Kaur constant badgering questions about his recent strange behavior and wants to know about bitch who squeezed him dry. The appalling images that scudded across his mind gave him sweat and sent down cold shivers through his spine.

Iswar shudders at the thought of disclosing the event and becomes cold in hands and gasps hard. Kalwant Kaur fumes for the answer while the emotions of revenge oozes out from every pore of her being. She asks Iswar to take the oath of the Sikh Guru and abuses Iswar so as to speak up. Manto's portrayal of woman characters are definitely very strong as he has not unnecessarily put them on a high pedestal or have glorified them but he has depicted them as the ones who are competent enough to battle over their rights. When Iswar assembled the courage to accept the attack made by him, Kalwant attacks him with his kirpan unsheathing it and plunging it in his neck. Blood gushed out from his gaping wound. Kalwant went on cursing the 'bitch' and pulling his hair, scratching his face and continued tearing.

This act by Kalwant may seem brutal and inhumane by millions but Manto rightfully gives his characters the power and the gut to reduce an infidel man like Iswar Singh to ashes for deceiving her. By this act Kalwant proves that she is a true Sikh who is fearless, audacious and courageous and one who cannot endure deceitfulness and fraudulence from the other half. She has the nerve to take things on her stride and devastate it. Ishwar recounts an old event when was prowling the streets at night, committing pillagery. He finally had entered a house where he slaughtered six men, kidnapped a young pretty girl and carried her some distance for the purpose of raping her at a deserted place. He further narrated that she had simply swooned off and then he carried her to an isolated area to rape her, but, he suddenly realized:

“She was dead. . . . I had carried a dead body . . . a heap of cold flesh . . . jani, give me your hand.”⁵

When in reaction, Kalwant Kaur places her hand on his, it was colder than ice. Ironically, Iswar cannot rape the girl because she is dead. This incapacity to accomplish the atrocious act because the body of the girl is no longer reactive, only highlights the entire idea of abduction getting collapsed, which symbolically emphasizes on his impotency. Against the charges of obscenity, Manto himself remarks:

“The story seemingly revolves round one aspect of sexual psychology, but infact, in it an extremely subtle message is given to man, that, even at the last limit of cruelty and violence, of barbarity and bestiality, he does not lose his humanity!”⁶

This ghastly act highlights the unwrapped violence that raged naked during the partition of India and Pakistan. Women's body has always been presented as sites of war to exert hostility and patriarchal control. The idea of rape itself has varied connotations here as it clearly depicts that the female bodies are sacrosanct and revered as it is related to saving the honor of the nation. In the façade of partition and dislocation, the power politics of sexuality played its role, which Foucault highlights in his essay, *Right of Death and Power over Life* as how “Sex was a means of access both the life of the body and the life of the species”.⁷ The point that the stronger sex exploits the weaker one irrespective of nation and community is overall the dance which is being played.

The story *Mozail* breaks away the hackneyed image of sex-workers and the humiliation that they face so as to enable the readers not to demote them to positions of compliance and subservience. Mozail was a gussy and a free spirited woman who lived in Bombay. The story is set at the time of communal massacre in Bombay between Hindu, Muslim and Sikh. Tarlochan was in love with Mozail. The first encounter of Tarlochan with Mozail was enough to ignite fire in Tarlochan's

heart for her. Mozail possesses unstinted courage and audacity to go against the framed culture and belief of the society. They decided a day of marriage but on that very day Mozail did not turn up. When Mozail ditched Tarlochan and never turned up to get married, Tarlochan had fallen in love with a girl of his community. The setting is of the times when the Hindu-Muslim-Sikh riots broke out and Mozail comes to know that the sardar's fiancée is in danger. She compelled Tarlochan to disguise himself as a Muslim and save Kirpal Kaur.

Till now Tarlochan believed that Mozail was a promiscuous type of girl did not want to walk on the drawn lines of relationship. Initially Mozail has been portrayed as an uncouth, contemptuous, ignominious and barefaced woman who never took religion, customs, traditions and relationships seriously. She never feels embarrassed sitting with an unknown man. But she has a considerate heart that lies latent in her. She never lets Tarlochan cross his limits. When Tarlochan could not give up his religious inclinations of not opening his turban in spite of Mozail pleading him so much, she not only snubs it but goes to an extreme extent to uphold the ties of humanity. In order to save Kirpal Kaur and distract the attention of the crowd she stands stark naked in front of the protestors disrobing all her inhibitions. Mozail confronted the angry crowd but the bloodthirsty crowd was completely mesmerized by her beauty and got unfocused. Her beauty is well consumed and the patriarchal society was satiating their thirst through it. Mozail then slipped down from the stairs bleeding and blood pouring out of her mouth. The valiant woman whom Manto had introduced to us has got reduced to a muddle on the ground. When Tarlochan came to cover her naked body with his turban she gives back a razor-sharp reply transcending all the religious preferences and propensities of the society:

“Take away this rag of your religion. I don't need it.”⁸

Being a crusader of his times Manto wrote about women from all classes irrespective of their trade that they carried out just to highlight that even if the humanity would shove them into the dungeons he would amplify those million images to the world. To cap it all Fahmida Riaz's statement works apt when she pens down that:

“Mozel... In Indian parlance, she is Shakti incarnate, as she rises to save two lives. She can clearly see the dreadful hoax religion turned into in those ghastly days of communal rioting and rejects it in last breath.”⁹

Manto expresses extraordinary sensibility and sensitivity towards the women contingent chronicling their lives and trying to free them from the obnoxious whirlpool that they are fenced into. Manto has always given her women characters a lift inspite of the fact that the society had a regressive attitude towards them. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin presented the sufferings of a partition survivor, Somavati, who witnessed her pains and agonies as

“ Even today, there is no peace. No peace outside, no peace inside. There is no peace even today. I don't sleep, there is a feeling of being unsettled.”¹⁰

Every character has a story beneath its skin. Manto's characterization of woman in Urdu fiction is absolutely different from the others. He never believed to garb woman with the image of a deity who is pure and virgin. He structured them just as the way women want themselves to be felt- independent, respected, and self maintained. Manto has carved her women meticulously and exhibited them as the New Woman of the age with new ideals and thoughts.

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