

An Open Access, Widely Indexed, Peer Reviewed Referred
Journal

Vol. 1 No. 4, December, 2024

Manto's Short Stories: The Representation of Protesting Women Characters

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Saadat Hasan Manto, Urdu Literature, Partition, Patriarchal society, Women's rights, Self-Dignity, Social Injustice.

Received : 26 October, 2024

Revised : 27 November, 2024

Accepted: 11 December, 2024

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ABSTRACT

Saadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955), a renowned Urdu writer, is celebrated for his outspoken portrayal of societal realities, particularly the plight of women in South Asian society during the tumultuous era of partition. This research explores Manto's depiction of female characters that defy societal norms and challenges as well as the patriarchal structures in his short stories. Through an analysis of four significant characters – Mozel from "Mozel", Sugandhi from "A Woman's Life", Kalwant Kaur from "ThandaGosth", and Nesti from "The License" – the study examines how Manto presents these women as rebels who assert their dignity and human rights in the face of oppression. Manto's portrayal of these characters not only exposes the hypocrisy of societal attitudes towards women but also highlights their resilience and agency in navigating and resisting patriarchal constraints. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of Manto's feminist perspective and his enduring impact on literature, advocating for greater recognition of the strength and complexity of his female characters in challenging and redefining social norms. Through his stories, Manto illuminates the multifaceted experiences of women, offering heartbreaking insights into their struggles, aspirations, and triumphs amidst a backdrop of social upheaval and cultural transformation.

Introduction

Saadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955) was a well-known writer in his day, and the majority of his short stories dealt either directly or indirectly with the subcontinent's division. Along with this, he represents the real picture of society where women are believed as malleable and charming as well as always seemed to be tolerant in case of all the oppressions against them done by the patriarchal society. We are aware of Manto as a scandalous Urdu writer whose writings incited radicalism among the religious rights and many of his female characters do a free earning job like prostitution; Moreover, those females are very bold and protesting about their self-dignity. As a partition chronicler Manto's tales go into the historical event of the division, an accurate portrayal of society, political unrest, and disparities in religion and terrific oppression of the women. Though it was quite a galaxy of writers in the contemporary of Manto like, Krishan Chander (1914-1977), Khwaja Ahmad Abbas (1914-1987), Ismat Chughtai (1915-1991), Rajinder Singh Bedi (1915-1984), and so on, he, with his very individual styles create his own identity not only in Urdu literature but also in the world literature.

Actually, the partition of India is one of the most despicable and horrific periods that reproached the essence of womankind. Women were treated as objects or properties to be forfeited by the males in that time. This anguish and victimization of women were prevalent themes in partition literature. Saadat Hasan Manto, is renowned for his bold portrayal of societal realities, particularly the deprivation of the downtrodden women in South Asian society. He chooses the subjects for writing which were taken by a few writers of that time. Manto portrays his several female characters who remove the veils, exposes the nakedness and raise voice against the hypocrisy of the society. Overall, his female characters fight against the constraints of society by protesting themselves from those vulgar treatments.

'Salman Rushdie has described Manto as 'the undisputed master of the Indian short story' and a writer of 'low-life' fiction. Nothing could prohibit Manto from writing about the social outcasts whom society had excommunicated. Manto

never missed an opportunity to attack the superficiality of society, as he says, 'Prostitutes are really the products of society. Then why do we raise the demand for putting an end to them, when they form a legitimate part of our culture?' (Manto 114)

The women in Manto's fiction are rebellious, strong-headed, and one of their kind. They challenge the social taboos thrust upon them in a patriarchal society. Manto calls out the hypocrisy of society for discriminating on the basis of gender. As we notice:

'A woman, even if she were to deviate for one instance from the role given to her by men, is branded a whore. She is viewed with lust and contempt. Society closes on her doors. It leaves ajar for a man stained by the same ink. If both are equal, why are our barbs reserved for the woman?' (Manto 115)

In fact, Manto didn't discriminate against his characters based on their gender or class in society. According to Fahmida Riaz, a Urdu poet, 'Manto saw women the way he saw men.' The range of Manto's short stories is vast. He has created multi-dimensional characters and among those characters four female characters; Mozail from *Mozail*, Sugandhi from *A Woman's Life*, Kalwant Kaur from *ThandaGosthand* Nesti from *The License* can be considered as protesting characters. This discussion will revolve around these four female characters that raise voice in several situations for establishing their self-dignity and human rights.

Literature Review

The female characters created by Manto throw challenge to the archetype of patriarchalism throughout history. The protagonist female boldly dares to refute her male counterpart's egocentric personality in opposition. This is how Manto's art challenged society's nebulous, stereotype frameworks. He creates uncompromising depictions of women who symbolize rebellion against patriarchy, class exploitation, and communal brutality by resisting oppression and social expectations. Actually, the characters are agents of protest because

they question and often reject patriarchal structures and conventional standards imposed upon them, directly or indirectly.

Women like sex worker Saugandhi are shown in Hattak (The Insult), as resisting the dehumanization caused by patriarchy. Despite being marginalized, her agency is demonstrated by her refusal to take an insult from a client. Feminist critics, such as Ayesha Jalal, argue that "Saugandhi's rejection of shame and degradation represents a symbolic protest against societal hypocrisy, reclaiming the dignity denied to sex workers" (Jalal).

The public saw Manto's books as obscene and abhorrent since they preserved the unjust and terrible sufferings that women suffered at the hands of the cruel, manufactured and privileged society. Many publications that discuss Manto's writings say that the author has been misinterpreted with good reason. Among his critics, "those against Manto have censured him unreservedly, while those who have praised him have generally done so apologetically or defensively" (Akhtar and Flemming 1-3).

Dr. Flemming in her work quotes Frank O'Conner, who says that a short story characteristically deals with "those at the fringes or outside of civilized society... the short story conveys an "intense awareness of human loneliness." (Coppola, 219-222). This interpretation of the short tale form is supported by Manto's works. His main characters are often prostitutes who live on the periphery of civilized society. Even though this has been noted, as well as the fact that Manto portrays these people in a compassionate manner, we may still read about how these marginalized individuals gain agency in his works, such as Mozail.

In some cases, Manto also criticizes women for being sexually subjugated and for being unable to resist the torment that their masculine culture inflicted upon them. Although this is unavoidably relevant to today's ultramodern world, where women are still judged according to outdated standards of honor, yet in some of his stories, this great writer has shown some female characters those have that much power to challenge the society's irrational rules against women.

Like Mozail and Saugandhi. As they are not always only victims, powerless to create a self-identity or to influence but often exercise an agency which is

oftentimes enabled because of their marginalization. Manto's stories have primarily been seen to be bleak portrayals of his female protagonists, who seem to have no option other than a silent resignation to their fates, an idea that a number of critics for instance Mahnaz Ispahani propose. Ispahani in her analysis says that in his female characters, Manto most starkly evokes the physical psychological degradation of the losers and the poor. But sometimes the darkness seems too unrelieved, too much narrowness of vision; his emphasis on the disfigurement of women's spirits and bodies is rarely relieved by a trait of a woman of whole character, with independent emotions (Ispahani 183-193).

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to conduct a comparative analysis of the selected short stories of Saadat Hasan Manto to explore the presentation of Manto's female characters. Through an investigation of four significant characters – Mozel from "Mozel", Sugandhi from "A Woman's Life", Kalwant Kaur from "Thanda Gosth", and Nesti from "The License" – the study examines how Manto epitomizes these women as rebels who affirm their dignity and human rights in the face of oppression. Secondary data sources, such as newspapers, magazines, and internet articles, are utilized to gather relevant information and contextualize the writer's responses within the broader of historical narrative. The study exerts a qualitative approach, involving a close reading of the selected short stories of Manto and utilizing literary and rhetorical analysis techniques to uncover the writer's insights into their struggles, aspirations, and accomplishments within a framework of social disruption and cultural transformation.

Result and Discussion

Although differences between men and women are observed in gender identity or especially in social construction, no special line of distinction can be drawn between these two in human judgment. Society, culture, lifestyle, economy, national and global circumstances sometimes retain back the females, yet, not only the feelings of happiness but also the feelings of sadness are the same for

both men and women. Sadat Hasan Manto perceived this issue with his wisdom and holistic understanding in such a way that in his stories he established women in a special status who are lagging behind in various judgments. Manto's women are not bound by traditional social norms rather they are omnipresent and almost equal in social life with the various features of men.

As we get a vivid description of Mozel from Trilochan, at the first crack of the eponymous story 'Mozel' where she is explained as bold, brave and energetic character. Basically, Manto, the great writer, judges women exactly the same way he judges men, that's why he draws strong women characters like Mozel, an elegant and rare Jewish woman who falls in love with a Sikh man.

Mozel appears in the story as an open minded and friendly character at the very initial level of her meeting with Trilochan, her Sikh boyfriend. Interestingly, his first impression for her was that she was really quite mad. He describes thus:

Her brown hair was cut short and looked disheveled. She wore thick, unevenly laid lipstick that sat on her lips like congealed blood. She wore a loose white dress, cut so low at the neck that you could see three-quarters of her big breasts with their faint blue veins. Her thin arms were covered with a fine down. She seemed to have just stepped out of a hairdresser's after a haircut. Her lips were not as thick as they looked, but it was the liberal quantities of crimson-red lipstick she plastered on them that gave them the appearance of thick beefsteaks. (Manto 28)

Here we notice Mozel to be very strict to her preferences. Sometimes she goes out with old friends all on a sudden ignoring Trilochan even she left him on the day of their wedding. As we come to know from the story:

She told Tarlochan to wait for her at a taxi stand in front of the store the next day, but she never turned up. He later learnt that she had gone off with an old lover of hers who had recently bought a new

car. They had moved to Deolali and were not expected to return to Bombay for some time. (Manto 32)

So, we get as a strict personality who's severely strict about her preferences. She is a female person who wants to be free from the bandages of the relation and the different responsibilities which comes after the relation. She is a free soul practicing the bohemian idea at that point. She never wants to mingle her identity with anything like religion, caste, class or gender for that sake.

At one point when it is revealed to Mozel that the fiancé of Tarlochan is in danger she takes the highest risk to save her only for the sake of love of Tarlochan. For saving her, she acted as a Muslim girl in front of the rioters. Tarlochan is also forced by her to pose as a Muslim in order to save Kirpal Kaur. Despite Mozel's persistent pleas, Tarlochan refuses to remove his turban due to his religious beliefs. Up until now, Tarlochan thought Mozel was a kind of girl that was promiscuous and did not want to walk on the established limits of partnership. Mozel was initially presented as an impolite, disrespectful, humiliating and barefaced lady who didn't take relationships, conventions, religion or tradition seriously. Moreover, she never feels awkward while she's seated next to a stranger. In fact, she possesses a latent considerate heart. She never permits Tarlochan to go beyond his bounds. But for saving Tarlochan's beloved she throws her Jewish attire to Kirpal Kaur due to demotivate the rioters and the midst of extreme inhumanity at the time of partition, the Jewish girl Mozel is seen shining in the glory of self-sacrifice.

Towards the end of the story, we witness Mozel's dying and Tarlochan hopelessly staring at her as she strips completely in front of the demonstrators in an attempt to save Kirpal Kaur and divert the focus of the throng. Mozel faces the enraged mob but her mesmerizing beauty and acting charmed them causing to lose their concentration. Her beauty was well appreciated and patriarchal society used it to quench their need. Her nudity contributed to the rioter's picture appearing nude as well as the religion that sparked the altercation between the two groups of people was unable to conceal this nudity. Somehow she made

people realize that religious distinctions are really a manufactured means of undermining society's morals and this should be contested as much as possible rather than accepted.

In addition to exposing his audience to the harsh realities of society, Manto bursts the myth of traditional literature, which elevates patriarchy and views women as the inferior/weaker gender. He portrays strong female characters that battle with traditional culture, stand up against lies, and fight for their love in an effort to strengthen the voice of women.

Although resentment and self-esteem are two different human feelings, they are like opposite sides of the same coin. But the magical writer Manto has created a wonderful mixture of these two in the same character. It is only when a woman existing as the subservient of the men and perceiving her humiliation, learns to confront against that situation, she transforms into a complete human being from a woman. Shugandhi, who has been prostituted day after day, eventually begins to hate the man she loves and prefers her pet dog. In order to trust the person he loves, he faces a feeling called self repentance. However, Manto did not let her die but rather decorated her as a protesting woman in the story 'Hattak'.

Sugandhi, the leading character of the story 'Hattak' / 'A Woman's Life', plays role of a self-dependent woman with a profession of prostitution, who even provides an economic support to one of her lovers. Though her lover, Madhav, hardly comes to meet her end every time doesn't forget promising her to send money order after going back to his own residence with a condition of leaving Sugandhi's profession by her own wish.

One night Sugandhi went with her agent Ramlal to meet a visitor on the nearby road but when that man had a look on her, opening the car's window, he just disliked Sugandhi uttering a sigh and subsequently left her. Standing at this situation, the beautiful woman, Sugandhi started to perceive that why that man

didn't like her and why he didn't even talk to her once as well as she thought why that person just uttered 'oonh' instead of telling a full sentence. She had a devastated mental condition for being insulted in this way. As it is described:

He left without speaking to her. Saugandhi was trembling, trying hard to deal with the situation.' What did he mean by "ugh"? That he did not like me? The son of a ' The car was gone, the red glow from its fading tail-lights barely visible now. She wanted to scream, 'Come back...stop....come back! (Manto 54)

This kind of rejection from Seth, her visitor, hits her conscience of self-dignity and her temper eliminates all her misconceptions. Her inner conscience protects her from being exploited on daily basis. Rather she finds her love even to her dog avoiding her lover, Madhav as he comes again to grab some money from her with uttering the same promise. But this time Sugandhi rejects him in her own way because she is now transformed into a human being from a woman as well as her self-awareness enable her to break all the collapses around her. She is determined to live her own way of life by quitting from all the ill-treatments expressed from the male dominated society. The description of Saugandhi is remarkable for its altitude of humanity:

Saugandhi's capacity for loving others was large. She could have fallen in love with any of the men who paid for her love and she could have sustained that feeling. Even now she was in love with four men whose pictures adorned her room. Saugandhi always felt that she as very large-hearted, but wondered why the same quality was not to be found in men. She could not understand this and once involuntarily she said to her image in the mirror, 'Saugandhi the world has not treated you well... . (Rumi 75-86)

When a person is able to realize self-respect, he/she becomes as pure as solid gold. This purification leads him/her to a universe of infinite peace. Saugandhi reaches in such a condition and Manto depicts the women like her in his own way:

Manto considered them as victims of the pharisaical spirit of the society and took it upon himself to pen down their plight. These so-called 'fallen women' had to sell their bodies to earn their daily bread. Manto empathized with them and stated that "[t]he circumstance of such a woman is surely not deserving of hatred or contempt. (Manto 115)

'Sugandhi' sprouts as a woman with self-awareness and determination to put an end against her exploitation and living her own life. For having the intelligence of perceiving her own exploitation Saugandhi is considered as more powerful woman than any virtuous wife in many ways. As we can mark the following statement about this ambitious character, 'Sugandhi's character is more powerful than that of many virtuous wives, a character that has the ambition and intelligence to understand her exploitation' (Minj)

Besides, we notice, "If you find my stories dirty, the society you are living in is dirty. With my stories, I only expose the truth." It is the own statement of the great Urdu writer Manto who felt himself to twig things from real life. Partition ruined the whole nation as well as forgetting about humanity and brotherhood people created a barbarous society full of beasts where women were treated as an object and their honor is a continuation of men's honor. In the long run, raping served as a mean of depriving the competitor society of its honor. Manto's non-fictional short story "ThandaGhost" (Colder Than Ice) set in the time where there is rivalry between the Muslims, Hindu's and Sikhs, a Sikh man rapes a woman out of hatred for other community though later he finds out that he's raped a corpse.

Although the setting of the story is somewhere in pre-partition subcontinent during extermination of Muslims, Kalwant Kaur is revealed as a rebellious character like Mozel in the story "Mozel", Nesti in "The License" and so on. She appears also as a bold, dynamic and fervent lady who kills Iswar Singh, an illiterate murderer, a traipse and pillager type of a Sikh. After erasing hatred on

a corpse Iswar comes to his wife but he seems not to be sexually aroused by her when she attempts to seduce him. Rather he thinks continuously about the woman he raped subsequently, the wife is enraged and kills him.

Instead of being portrayed as helpless and cowardly, Kalwant Kaur is seen as the woman who uses her agency to take revenge. Though this act of Kalwant may be observed as inhuman and relentless but Manto intentionally gives courage to his female character for killing an infidel man like Iswar Singh due to deceive her. She has the nerve to take things on her stride and devastate it. Iswar narrates an old event when was prowling randomly, he entered a house where six men were slaughtered by him. Not only this but also he kidnapped a young pretty girl and carried her at a deserted area for ravishing her. He further described that when he proceeded his inhuman behavior he realizes all on a sudden: "She was deadI had carried a dead body.....a heap of cold flesh.....Jani, give me your hand" (Manto 20).

Being astonished when Kalwant puts her hand on his hand, he feels the touch colder than ice. Ironically, he can't ravish the girl as she was dead and the fact is that he is unable to carry out the heinous deed because that pretty girl was no longer responsive. This description merely shows how the entire concept of kidnapping disintegrates and symbolically it highlights his inability. Regarding the accusation of this vulgarity 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 doesn't lose his humanity!(Fleming 31)

When a girl's intense suffering was depicted in writing with detailed descriptions the patriarchal society took notice. But it may be argued that she exacted revenge for the killing of a helpless girl whom she also considered a lady. Moreover, actress Sonal Sehgal's interview provides us a clear concept of the characteristics of Kalwant Kaur as she elaborates:

Though she was a mistress, she was a lady with integrity who did not tolerate infidelity. I think that is the beauty of the character where Manto did not judge her. In modern days, we are also celebrating flaws of an individual that Manto started doing back then. Perhaps that is why he is still relevant. (Sehgal)

Just as no man is born a criminal, no woman is born a prostitute rather society creates criminals and at the same time prostitute. Although, patriarchal society considers women to be self-willed if they protest against the orthodox of the society and try to be self-dependant, it is perceived as self respect in women's eyes. Women have the same capacity for economic growth as men without being defeated, but the society does not value that capacity, instead, in most cases, it forces them to be transformed into consumer goods and circulated too. In the short story 'License' Manto expresses this judgment perfectly and vigorously.

In the story 'License' Nesti, is the creation of Manto by whom he shows how a woman confronts when she needs. Here Manto represents Nesti, firstly, as a beautiful teenager, secondly, as a loyal wife, thirdly as a self-dependent woman and finally as a brave personality who chooses herself to be purchased by money and consider it as a free earning job.

At the beginning of the story we get Abu, a Tonga driver, who earns his livelihood by his horses. One day Abu and Nesti met coincidentally and fall in love, subsequently they married each other. But as we see before the wedded life of Abu and Nesti, Abu was ordered by her beloved to honor the mistake of touching her as it is the idea of chastity that are endorsed by a patriarchal society. When the story gradually develops we see, after being arrested and jailed for two years under the charge of kidnapping Nesti, though he handovers his horse and coach to his friend Dino for hire so that Nesti can be supported financially in the absence of Abu but unfortunately Abu dies of TB which was chronic in his family. After his death Dino proposes Nesti to wed him but she refuses him and consequently he becomes irregular with paying the hire charges. Being

compelled she takes away the tonga and gives them to another of Abu's friends, named Maja but unfortunately Maja begins behaving the same like Dino. Not only Dino and Maja some other people treat Nesti similarly when she tries to handover that tonga to them.

Finally, being dishonored repeatedly Nesti started living a life of a coach woman. In one side Manto shows the approaches of marrying, rapping or robbing Nesti which highlight how a single woman can be perceived as 'easy prey' for fulfilling male desire and at the same time he portrays Nesti as a brave, stunned and loyal character who protests herself from the black paw of the patriarchal society. She herself starts riding tonga but the society creates a strong barrier against her and even the passengers sometimes used to ride on her Tonga without any reason and instructed her to ride to any and every direction without any destination as they were enchanted by her physical beauty. Even all of them were eager to leer at her beauty. Though she seems to protest herself but one morning she is ordered by the municipal men to meet at their office and directly cancel her license on the grounds that women can't be coach women. Nesti is being punished for breaking social norms. She not only argues but also pleads fails to defend her and being depressed she raises question that how she should earn her livelihood except driving a coach and astonishingly the officer replies that she should turn to sex work. Finally, Nesti appeals for the license for selling her body and this time she receives it very easily. 'No woman comes into this world to become a prostitute but circumstances and financial hardships force them to sell their body. Often it is the society which pushes them towards it.' (Minj)

Again, in one of his essays this great writer Manto mentions:

A man remains a man no matter how poor his conduct. A woman, even if she were to deviate for one instance, from the role given to her by men, is branded a whore. She is viewed with lust and contempt. Society closes on her doors it leaves ajar for a man stained by the same ink. If both are equal, why are our barbs reserved for the woman. (Mondal)

In fact, during partition women were not enough educated for pursuing any job rather they were used for the men's gratification. Moreover, women were not allowed to participate in any kind of job except sex workers and this social as well as real picture has been depicted lively in this story by the character Nesti. But from the beginning she was not a defeated woman rather she fought against the social system but finally she was compelled to lead her life like downstream. Moreover, it is noticed that every female character in Manto's works has achieved emancipation. Even though his short stories are brief, he was able to capture a range of emotions in each character. They are compassionate, flawed and positive as well as they are not binary.

Conclusion

To recapitulate, it can be said that Saadat Hasan Manto is renowned for depicting diverse characteristics of women through his female characters in several short stories as well as his portrayal of those characters reflect the independence, respect and self-maintenance that women seek for them. In fact, his female characters are recognized for their toughness and resilience. They are also subtle and stalwart who have the power to inspire today's women to raise voice for themselves at the same time they can create a defense against the violation of their rights.

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