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Research Article



## Prostitutes and Fallen Women in the Short Stories of Manto

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### Abstract

Manto, an outstanding figure in the *oeuvre* of Urdu short fiction, was a true 'progressive' who could hold a mirror up to the society more faithfully and brutally than any of his contemporaries. With his fearless championing of the truth, Manto brought an element of realism in the Urdu short stories. Gifted with a sharp clear-eyed acumen and a rare sensitivity, Manto loved to handle bold and unconventional themes. He looked at human nature in all its diversity and had a rare knack for not only viewing darkness and ugliness more acutely than others, but also cherishing goodness and beauty in the midst of wickedness, betrayal and brutality. His legacy constitutes a formidable body of work that focuses mainly on the working class, especially the outcast, the

marginalized and the peripheral. Manto wrote with particular empathy about women, especially the sex workers and prostitutes and, in a number of his short stories, sought to explore their human essence and relentless quest for identity and dignity. Being the timeless product of his age, Manto compels repeated returns and revisits to his work. My paper attempts to take into account Manto's handling of prostitutes and fallen women in his select short stories so as to reveal how Manto views them through a humanistic lens which serves to humanize these fallen women, highlight their predicament and show them in positive light.

**Keywords:** Hypocrisy, Provocative, Scandalous, Propriety, Fallibility, Pimp, Promiscuous, Gratification, Deplorable, Ensemble, Brothel, Eczematous, Destitute

Saadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955) holds the distinction of being one of the most powerful, widely read and translated writers of the 20th century Urdu literature. In a literary and journalistic career that spanned more than two decades, Manto wrote prolifically and penned 270 short stories, more than 100 radio plays, a large number of essays, one novel, several letters, and many delightful biographical sketches of well known personalities of his time. Though most famous for his powerful short stories on Partition, Manto often wrote on societal issues and constantly challenged the hypocrisy and sham morality of the so-called 'civilized society'. Manto's "addiction to writing gave us two indispensable gifts – the best critique of the Partition and the sectarian lunacy which worked behind and around it, and an honestly caring analysis of the life of the marginalized sections of humanity" (Singh 138).

Many of Manto's stories touched upon provocative topics such as sex, addiction and lust that often drove him into controversy. Manto was attacked and condemned for the alleged carnal and lewd contents of a number of his short stories. He was charged with obscenity and had to face court trial three times in British India for his short stories "Dhuan", "Bu" and "Kali Shalwar" and three times in Pakistan for "Khol Do", "Thanda Gosht" and "Upur Neeche Darmiyaan".

Rakshanda Jalil rightly observes:

One of the finest Urdu short story writers – provocative, outrageous, scandalous, sometimes even blasphemous– Manto was the original enfant terrible of Urdu literature. Cocking a snook at society, literary norms, and most notions of propriety, Manto touched the hearts of many with his convincing and original portrayal of human fallibility. (Jalil 307)

Manto in his writings reveals an attentiveness to the social reality of the marginalized figure. Hailed as a champion of women and the downtrodden, Manto wrote mainly about people belonging to the lower classes and those living on the periphery of the society. The protagonists of many of his short stories are pimps, prostitutes, sex workers, local thugs, tongawallas, beggars, coolies, drivers and even madmen and Manto views them through a humanistic lens. The prostitutes and the fallen women get the most empathetic treatment from him. Manto's "best stories and the ones for which he is remembered most are those in which he depicts, with great mastery, fallen women and prostitutes against the backdrop of filthy lanes and slums" (Faiyaz 73).

“Hatak”, “Kali Shalwar”, “Mummy”, “Babu Gopi Nath” and “Khushia” are some of Manto’s most famous short stories revolving around the lives of such destitute women who often cater to the sexual needs of men belonging mainly to the respectable ‘civilized’ world. What is ironical is that such women are discarded by this very world and fail to find a place in it. Manto’s prostitutes and fallen women have feelings and emotions and are capable of humanity. They never allow men to completely tarnish their self-respect and individuality and often walk away from toxic men who do not value them.

In the words of Harish Narang, a well-known critic and translator of Manto:

One of Manto’s great social concerns has been to champion the cause of women, particularly women from the margins ... Manto was hauled over the coals for focussing his attention on the prostitutes and the details of their lives, comparing it to filthy stinking drains that carry muck. Manto’s defence was that they were a part of the society - any society- and fulfilled an important societal function. As such, he considered it a part of his social responsibility to show their face as much as to focus on better and beautiful aspects of life. (Narang 18-19)

In his short story “Hatak” (translated into English as “Insult”) Manto narrates the everyday struggles of a sentimental, kind-hearted and generous prostitute named Saugandhi who, in her craving for genuine love and affection, gets emotionally attached to the men who regularly visit her as her customers and proclaim their love for her:

This life that she had been living for the last five years was also a kind of hide and seek ... She was happy because she had to be happy... every night some man or another would be on her broad teakwood bed ... Every night, an old or new client would say: “Saugandhi, I love you ...!” And Saugandhi, knowing fully well that he was telling a lie, would become soft like a wax and would feel as if she was being loved truly. (Manto 248-49)

The yearning for love was so strong in Saugandhi that it almost filled her entire being. Manto writes:

Love – what a beautiful word that was! She wanted to melt and rub this love all over her body; rub it so that it could get absorbed in her skin, or she herself should enter it- enter it somehow – and close the lid from the top. When the feeling of being loved became intense in her, then often she felt taking the man lying next to her in her lap and start patting him and put him to sleep, singing lullabies to him. (249)

Saugandhi’s illusion, however, does not last long. She is ultimately able to see through the sham behind their false promises and declarations of love for her. She now breaks her ties with all her ‘lovers’ including Madho, a *hawaladar* from Pune, who was her favourite and who gave her a false hope that he might marry her someday and make her his wife. Saugandhi, in an unexpected bold move, throws them all out of her life literally as well as metaphorically and prefers to sleep beside her eczematous dog on her bed.

The title of the story comes from the rejection of Saugandhi by a rich *Seth*, a prospective customer, for whom Saugandhi, despite being unwell, gets up at two o’clock in the night, wears a bright coloured silken sari, decks herself with a heavy make- up and comes downstairs. The rich *Seth* however, after surveying Saugandhi under his flashlight, utters an “oonh” and drives away immediately without a word. Manto writes:

*Seth Saheb*, flashed a torch light near her face - for a moment, that flash of light blinded her sleepy eyes - then there was a sound of pressing the button and the light went out and simultaneously, an 'oonh' ... sound escaped the *Seth's* mouth ... What happened; what was the meaning of this 'oonh?' 'Oonh' that was still buzzing in her ears; what ...? what...? She heard the voice of the pimp Ram Lal: "Didn't like you ... All right, I 'll leave now... wasted two hours for nothing..." Hearing this a sudden current went through Saugandhi's legs, her arms, and her hands: 'Where is that car ... where is that Seth... so the 'oonh' means that he did not like me ... his...' An abuse rose in her belly and stopped at the tip of her tongue. (254)

This rejection of Saugandhi by the rich *Seth* comes as a serious jolt to her and sets in motion a cycle of anger and disgust in her. Saugandhi realizes that to her customers she was only an object for sexual gratification. Whether it was Madho, who was playing with her emotions and regularly extracting her hard earned money with false promises, or the rich *Seth* who had outrightly rejected her - they were all using, abusing and discarding her for their own selfish motives. Acting under a sudden impulse Saugandhi rejects all her 'lovers', including Madho, and drives them out of her life. She now picks up "the itchy dog in her lap and putting it next to her, she went to sleep on the teak bed" (265).

The unhygienic, deplorable condition in which Saugandhi is living in a small room with a dog suffering from eczema as her constant companion is indicative of the sad, tormented, deprived and filthy lives of majority of poor prostitutes that Manto has depicted so realistically in his writings. In the words of a critic:

Saugandhi belongs to a rejected, silent and invisible section of society which consists of women fallen from the mainstream society of honourable ladies and gentlemen. She is a member of that part of society which is forced to lead a hell-like life in a dark world ironically looked down upon by that very respectable society which not only has produced it but provides it full sustenance also. (Goyal 104)

Towards the close of the story, Saugandhi values the company of her eczematous dog more than that of any of her 'lovers' because perhaps the dog, unlike the men, has never used or abused Saugandhi with deceit, cheat, rejection, betrayal or lies.

Another famous short story "Kaali Shalwar" (translated into English as "Black Shalwar"), for which Manto had to face court trial on charge of obscenity, dwells upon the social, psychological and religious issues concerning the life of a small-town prostitute named Sultana, who with her pimp, Khudabaksh, has migrated from Ambala Cantonment to Delhi in search of better prospects. The story begins thus: "Before coming to Delhi, she was in Ambala Cantonment where she had many white customers ... In Ambala Cantonment, she had a thriving business. The whites from the Cantonment came to her after drinking and disposing of eight to ten of them within three to four hours, she'd make twenty-three rupees" (216).

Contrary to their expectations, Sultana's 'business' goes down in the new place and despite trying hard she fails to attract customers. Manto writes, "When Sultana remained out of work for a month, she told herself- customers surely do not show up from day one after you open your business. But she got worried when no man showed up even after two months had elapsed" (220).

After three months of practically no business in the metropolis, Sultana finds herself struggling with acute financial crisis. What worried her the most was the fact that *Moharram*, the religious month of mourning, was fast approaching and she did not have an all black dress to wear for the occasion. With meagre funds Sultana had somehow managed to arrange a black *kurta* and a black *dupatta* but she still needed a black coloured traditional *shalwar* to complete her ensemble to be worn in *Moharram*.

Sultana feels emotionally drawn towards a man named Shankar who visits her regularly and manages to avail her 'services' free of cost. As *Moharram* is fast approaching and Sultana has not yet earned enough to arrange for a black *shalwar*, she reluctantly asks Shankar to arrange for it. Manto writes:

When Shankar was about to leave, Sultana said: "Shankar, will you do me a favour?"

Shankar replied: "First tell me, what is it?"

Sultana felt embarrassed somewhat: "You'd think, I want to extract a price from you but..."

"Say it ...why did you stop?"

Sultana took courage and said: "The thing is this that *Moharram* is at hand and I do not have any money to get a black *shalwar* stitched..."

Shankar said, after listening to her: "So, you want that I pay you some rupees for you to get a black *shalwar* stitched".

Sultana said immediately: "No, what I mean was that, if possible, get me a black *shalwar*".  
(229)

Sultana is relieved when Shankar promises to get her a black *shalwar* on the first day of *Moharram*. However, before leaving he asks Sultana to give him her silver earrings. Eight days later, on the first day of *Moharram*, Shankar turns up as promised and hands over her a black satin *salwar*. With this black piece, Sultana's mourning dress for *Moharram* was complete now.

In the afternoon of the same day, however, Sultana has a shocking revelation when, wearing her black dress, she comes face to face with Mukhtar, another prostitute working and living in the same building as hers. Looking at her silver earrings now adorning Mukhtar's ears, Sultana at once realizes the clever 'trick' that Shankar has played upon both of them. Acting as a middle man and taking advantage of both the women, Shankar has exchanged Sultana's earrings with Mukhtar's black *shalwar*. He has, in this manner, cleverly 'obliged' both of them. Shankar turns out to be the typical male opportunist who has been emotionally exploiting Sultana as well as Mukhtar and seeking sexual favours 'free of cost' from both the women. The story ends with both Sultana and Mukhtar staring at each other in disbelief, feigning ignorance about being emotionally fooled by the same man and remaining silent as if passively accepting their fate. Manto ends the story with the following lines:

When Sultana opened the door, Mukhtar entered. She looked at her clothes and said: "The shirt and the *dupatta* appear to be dyed but the *shalwar* is new... when did you get it stitched?"

Sultana replied; "The tailor brought it today only..."Saying this, her eyes fell on the ears of Mukhtar" "Where did you buy these earrings from?"

Mukhtar replied: "Got them only today..." After this, both fell silent for a while. (230)

One of Manto's longest short stories titled "Mummy" is written in the first person with Manto himself as the narrator. The story is set in Poona and revolves around an ageing and compassionate matron of a brothel, Mrs. Stella Jackson, who is lovingly addressed as 'Mummy' by her clients. At first sight Manto finds Mummy, the protagonist, to be a "worn out white woman" (59) wearing a 'loud' make up but soon realizes that she was an "interesting person" after meeting whom "there was no curiosity to know anything else except her being a woman" (58). Though considered to be a nuisance by the 'civilized' society, Mummy is very caring and compassionate, "in her heart lay maternal love for all" (80).

In her brothel are several Anglo-Indian girls, including the "platinum blonde" Felus, Mummy's own daughter born "from someone" (72). All the four friends of Manto in Poona, particularly Chadha who was Mummy's favourite, have a serious crush on the girl. When one evening Chaddha, in a highly inebriated state, approaches Felus and tries to force himself upon her to satisfy his lust for her, Mummy gets furious. She severely reprimands Chadha, her favourite client, slaps him hard on the face and pushes him away from the girl shouting "Get out ... get out...!" (82) . However, when after few days Chadha falls seriously ill, Mummy arranges for a doctor, gets him admitted to a hospital and looks after him with utmost care. Manto writes: "she was the epitome of affection. Putting her hand on Chadha's hot forehead, she said only this: "My son ...my poor son!" (85).

Later in the story Chadha, in his letter to Manto, acknowledges his indebtedness towards Mummy for saving his life in the following words: "Respectable Mummy has saved her scoundrel son from the jaws of death" (86). Upon his next visit to Poona, Manto finds Mummy same as ever. He writes:

Mummy was the self-same Mummy: Polly's Mummy, Dolly's Mummy, Chadha's Mummy... she'd participate with the same maternal care in arranging soda water bottles, savoury snacks and other stuff needed for parties; the make up on her face was the same crude one ; her dresses were of the same bright colours; from under the layers of powder and rouge, her wrinkles showed similarly; but now these wrinkles appeared to me to be pious, pious wrinkles that were, forever, wrapped in very shoddy colours. (88-89)

Highlighting her compassionate and caring attitude towards everyone Manto further writes:

Mummy was the self-safe Mummy – when Vankutre's wife had a miscarriage, it was because of timely help from Mummy that her life was saved; when Thelma brought a dangerous disease from Marwar, it was on Mummy's insistence that her sons had her treated; when Kitty won a prize of five hundred rupees in solving a puzzle, then Mummy forced her to give at least half the money to Garibnawaz because Garibnawaz was short of money. During my fifteen days' stay, Mummy asked me often about my wife and enquired if so many years had passed after the death of my first child, why has another child not been born? (89)

The story ends on an ironical note when Mummy, despite her kind-heartedness and compassionate attitude towards everyone, is ostracized by the society and compelled to leave the town while her 'customers' continue to enjoy respectable status in the society. Summing up the reasons as to why Mummy had to leave Poona, Chadha tells Manto, "The government did not like her manners, did not like her behaviour... the parties at her place were objectionable in the eyes

of the government ... the police wanted to constrain her love and decency; they wanted to call her mother but use her as a pimp...sent her out of the city ...” (98) Acting as a mouthpiece of Manto, Chadha, at this point of the story, asks a very pertinent question, ” ...if she was a prostitute, a pimp ... if her existence is a threat to the society then she should be finished ... why was Poona’s filth asked to go somewhere else to be parked there ...? (98)

The short story closes with Chadha recalling the night when, driven by lust, he was about to commit a serious ‘wrong’ towards Felus but was stopped from so doing by Mummy’s stern intervention. Chadha laments the fact that Mummy was viewed as a ‘filth’ by the ‘respectable’ society and therefore was forced to leave Poona but he is hopeful that wherever Mummy goes now she will continue to play her role of the caring and instructing mother to many young men like him. He says:

Manto, I am sorry, when the filth went away, with it also went the purity which had – that night – washed away a big mistake and an obsessive wave from my mind ... she has gone away from Poona ... but she’d sink her roots wherever a wrong and obsessive wave would be born in young persons like me ...I hand over my Mummy to them ... Zindabad Mummy – Long Live Mummy... (98)

Through this short story Manto lends a touch of dignity and humaneness to the persona of a so called ‘fallen’ woman and disdains the sheer hypocrisy of the ‘civilized’ society.

In “Dus Rupay” (translated into English as “Ten Rupees”) Manto highlights the innocence and delicacy of a fifteen year old young girl, Sarita, who is pushed into flesh trade by her hapless, poverty stricken widowed mother. Sarita is often sent by her mother for ‘outings’ with men in exchange for money. Sarita, a young girl barely in her teens, does not understand the full implications of such trips and the payment made to her for such ‘services’. One day she is picked by three young boys who drive her in a car to the beach for ‘fun’ where they play, laugh and sing together. Sarita easily wins over the young boys with her bodily charm and verbal playfulness and one of them offers her a ten-rupee note that she readily accepts and tucks in her blouse. She continues to enjoy the ride in the car speeding swiftly through the empty streets with fast blowing winds whipping over her face, filling her with excitement. To Sarita, who has a fascination for car rides, this outing turns out to be one of the most enjoyable and happiest experiences of her life.

The story ends with Sarita, who is used to accepting money from her clients, feeling baffled by the payment made to her on this occasion and, therefore, returning the ten- rupee note to the boys saying “This money – why should I take it?” This action on the part of Sarita shows that not only is the ten-rupee note of little interest to her but also that she is oblivious of the point of her being paid for her labour.

In another short story titled “Licence” Manto draws our attention to the fact that no woman becomes a prostitute by choice but is compelled to become one on account of financial hardships and cruel circumstances often created by the society. The protagonist of the story, after the death of her husband, wishes to ride his *tonga* to earn her livelihood. She attempts doing so for few days and is able to earn some money. But the society does not allow her this ‘privilege’ for long. She is pursued by passengers, majority of whom are lecherous and flirtatious males who sit in her *tonga* only to ogle at her. Moreover, she is now viewed as a menace by the ‘respectable’ society. Finally, she is summoned by the committee that issues licence to the *tonga* drivers and is made to

surrender her licence on the ground that she, being a female, cannot pursue this profession. Despite repeated pleadings, she is denied a licence to ride a *tonga*. At last with one to support her, she is compelled to ask for a licence to sell her body and Manto, in his characteristic style, states that this time she is at once granted the licence. Through this story Manto highlights the fact that it is often the society that pushes majority of women into such circumstances where they are left with no other option but to sell their bodies to earn their daily bread.

Another short story titled “Mozel” by Manto is set in Bombay against the partition riots. The protagonist of the story, Mozel, is a strong, independent, free-spirited, promiscuous Jewish woman with a voluptuous body and many boyfriends. The intimate relations Mozel shares with several male friends qualify her as a woman with loose morals and she is looked down upon by the respectable society as a whore. A young Sikh man, Trilochan Singh, feels attracted towards Mozel and expresses his desire to marry her. Mozel, however, rejects the offer on the ground that the Sikh man is too religious and conservative. Mozel is happy when after few days she learns about Trilochan Singh’s engagement with a Sikh girl he has now fallen in love with.

The turning point in the story comes when Mozel learns that the life of Trilochan Singh’s fiancé is in danger as the building she is living in is attacked by a group of angry Muslim rioters. Mozel now rises to the occasion and is determined to save Trilochan’s fiancé at all cost. She forces Trilochan to disguise himself as a Muslim man and with him rushes into the building to rescue the young Sikh girl. Inviting threat to her own life, Mozel disrobes herself of her Jewish dress and makes the Sikh girl wear it and escape the rioters while Mozel herself is left stark naked. When confronted by the rioters, Mozel distracts them for a while with her naked body before slipping down the stairs of the building and falling to her death. When Trilochan Singh tries to cover Mozel’s naked body with his turban she removes it from her body with disdain and utters her last words, “Here, take it ... this religion of yours...” (160) before “her arm fell lifelessly on her breasts” (160). Through this short story Manto wants to impress upon his readers that a woman looked down upon by the respectable society as promiscuous, morally ruined and fallen is capable of an exemplary act of humanity that rises above all religions.

In a short life of just over forty two years Saadat Hasn Manto, “an outstanding writer of our times who belongs not only to Pakistan or the Indian sub-continent but to the larger heritage of world literatures” (Narang 282), managed to produce an impressive *oeuvre* of short fiction, plays, essays and life sketches which are comparable to the best in any language.

His acute observation, psychological insight into his characters, born of close interaction with them, courage to write what he observed, his graphic expression, his spontaneity, his prolificacy and the simplicity of his narrative brought him on a par with any great short story writer in any language, be it de Maupassant, Gorky, Chekhov or Maugham. (Ahmad, *The Express Tribune*)

Manto made sense of the world through a sharp observation of social interactions, examining power structures from the perspective of the marginalized, especially the sex workers, prostitutes and fallen women, whom he has portrayed with their dignity intact. “Whether it is Saugandhi, a small-time prostitute, or Mozel, the well to do Jew who is a nonconformist or Mummy, a procuress, all are revealed to be capable of finer feelings and have a sense of honour and a feeling of compassion for others” (Raza 102).



Harish Narang, in the “Afterword” to his translation of Manto’s short stories opines: Manto’s choice of not only prostitutes and pimps but other people living on the periphery was not accidental but a coolly calculated one. It was an essential part of his ideology – an ideology that foregrounded the lives of the marginalized and the subaltern with the clear objective of not only changing the course of the majority discourse but also to subvert it. (Narang 282)

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