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Voicing the Body and Silence: Gendered Violence and Trauma in Manto's Stories

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Abstract

Literature serves as a powerful medium for exploring various aspects of human experience, including abuse, exploitation, and the depiction of the human body. Authors in Indian literature frequently employ vivid imagery and symbolism to shed light on these persistent problems in a nuanced manner. While some may argue that these portrayals glorify or sensationalize violence and objectification, others believe that they serve as powerful tools for initiating conversations about important social issues.

This paper looks into Saadat Hasan Manto's rendering of the complex presentation of sexual exploitation and abuse of human bodies in his select short stories. Recognized as one of the finest Urdu novelists of all times, Manto's short stories "Colder Than Ice" (Thanda Gosht), "The Return" (Khol Do) and "Odour" (Boo) are representatives of sharp inquiries into the conjunction of sexuality, desire, and violence. Through these narratives, he interrogates the dominant societal conventions, revealing the fragility and objectification of the human body, especially that of women, amidst instances of violence and exploitation.

Situated in the context of the Partition of India in 1947, Manto's narratives speak of the wide-scale violence, displacement, and psychological trauma during such a turbulent period. The human body positions itself as a site of eroticism and brutality in most of his works, blurring all traditional notions of morality and normalizing sexual violation by connecting the dots between individual trauma and greater failures of society. This study examines Manto's unflinching portrayal of sexual violence and its psychological

consequences, therefore, offering a deep critique of issues that relate to gender-based violence and psychic burdens imposed by the dictate of societal mores.

Keywords: Sexual exploitation, abuse, violence, depiction of human body, displacement.

Literature is a form of artistic expression which serves as an essential tool for advocacy and awareness, creating connections that go beyond individual experiences to emphasize the shared humanity. It acts as a powerful lens that explores the complex realities of human experiences, especially related to sexual exploitation and abuse. By creating narratives that examine the nuances of human vulnerability, authors shed light on the often-hidden struggles of those who endure such violations. Literature not only portrays the physical and emotional impacts of exploitation, but also critiques the societal structures that allow such abuse to continue. By highlighting the human body as both a site of exploitation and identity, writers encourage readers to face uncomfortable truths and cultivate empathy around these critical issues.

Putting it specifically in the era of the Partition of India in 1947, the Progressive Writers' Movement was characterized by a bold and unwavering portrayal of social realities. These writers used an unvarnished language and emphasized the themes of class struggle, gender issues, and the human condition. Writers like Saadat Hasan Manto, Ismat Chughtai, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Krishan Chander, and Khadija Mastoor employed a straightforward narrative style that sought to challenge societal norms and provoke thought. They were committed to using literature as a means of social reform, often reflecting the cultural turbulence of their time.

Saadat Hasan Manto, one of South Asia's most provocative writers, carved a unique place in Urdu literature with his stark depictions of violence, sexuality, and human

suffering. The violent Partition of India left an enduring legacy of trauma, particularly for women, who were often treated as collateral in communal revenge. His stories "Colder Than Ice" (Thanda Gosht), "The Return" (Khol Do) and "Odour" (Boo) refuse to whitewash the brutality of Partition, instead forcing readers to confront the sufferings of women caught in this period's societal collapse. The violence during the Partition did not merely divide a region but marked a schism in the collective psyche, transforming women into symbolic battlegrounds. Nafisa Zargar observes that women were "abducted and taken anywhere to be destroyed and raped," (283) underlining the degree to which their suffering was intertwined with communal retaliation. For Manto, this systemic violence against women becomes an indictment of the patriarchal structures that allowed – and even justified, such suffering. By centring his stories on this silenced demographic, Manto challenges the societal values, compelling readers to confront the "living testimonies of partition's brutality" (Sattar et al. 218) through his female characters.

The portrayal of sexual exploitation, abuse, and the depiction of human body in Saadat Hasan Manto's short stories can be examined by essentially grounding the analysis in both trauma theory and feminist perspectives on bodily representation. The feminist critique of bodily exploitation and the systemic silencing of women deepen the understanding of Manto's narratives, particularly how patriarchal structures shape female suffering during times of crisis. Manto's stories bring attention to the struggles of marginalized women, whose pain is often ignored due to patriarchal norms. This marginalization serves as a strong critique of

how society plays a crucial role in ignoring the suffering of women. By embedding Freud's and Caruth's ideas of traumatic memory and feminist insights into silencing, Manto not only confronts the horrors of Partition but also raises essential questions about the collective conscience that enables such violence. Through his stark depictions of the human body, Manto ultimately lays bare the intersecting forces of trauma, patriarchy, and cultural complicity that render individual suffering a universal human indictment.

Manto's "Colder Than Ice" examines the psychological and physical dimensions of violence through the character of Ishwar Singh, whose actions reveal a disturbing confluence of masculinity, aggression, and trauma. As a man conditioned by societal norms of dominance, Ishwar Singh embodies how communal violence during Partition warped traditional gender roles, transforming men into both perpetrators and victims of psychological trauma. Nafisa Zargar highlighting this twisted portrayal of masculinity in her paper "The Body in Pain", observes that Manto's male characters often channel their latent aggression into "sanctioned acts of violence," using women's bodies as sites for revenge (283).

Set against the traumatic backdrop of Partition Manto's stories expose both physical and psychological violence, revealing the ethical decline caused by communal conflicts. Contrary to the other writers of his era such as Ismat Chughtai and Rajinder Singh Bedi, who sugar-coated the brutalities of Partition, Manto chose to portray them in their raw and unsettling truth. As Musharraf Ali in his essay "Saadat Hasan Manto is Still Alive" writes, Manto's depiction of bodies is a "reflection of the moral bankruptcy that partition evoked" (205). In a similar way, Fizra Sattar and others argue that Manto's stories articulate the "silence of marginalized women" and their struggle within patriarchal structures (217). The silence of the marginalized women highlights how the

systemic oppression pushes women's trauma to the edges of societal awareness.

Saadat Hasan Manto, in his stories, examines the male aggression and its psychological toll on women and the men themselves. In "Colder Than Ice," Ishwar's violent act reflects a profound inner turmoil, and the story's ending highlights his desensitization and loss of masculinity, which critiques the normalization of sexual violence as an expression of power and control. For Ishwar, the emotional disconnect following his crime signifies not only remorse but also an inability to reconcile his role as both aggressor and sufferer. Alex Tickell notes that Ishwar's breakdown blurs the line "between perpetrator and victim" presenting masculine trauma as a crisis that destabilizes self-perception and societal roles (Tickell 360). As Tickell further observes, that Manto's male characters often exhibit "psychic numbness," which disrupts conventional masculinity by exposing men's internal breakdowns amid the communal violence (Tickell 359). Ishwar Singh's numbness is depicted in the story through his inability to get excited while making love to his mistress:

Kalwant Kaur began to boil with passion like a kettle on high fire. But there was something wrong. Ishwar Singh, despite his vigorous efforts at foreplay, could not feel the fire which leads to the final and inevitable act of love. Like a wrestler who is being had the better of, he employed every trick he knew to ignite the fire in his loins, but it eluded him. He felt cold. (34)

By portraying male aggression as an expression of suppressed guilt and fractured identity, Manto challenges the cultural valorisation of masculinity, revealing the devastating effects of trauma on both individual psyche and collective morality. The suppressed guilt of Ishwar Singh is unveiled in the last line of the story, "Kalwant Kaur placed her hand on his. It was colder than ice" (36).

The stories of Manto serve as a testament to the psychological scars left on individual bodies and the collective consciousness, forcing readers to grapple with the uncomfortable realities of human cruelty. In the story "Colder Than Ice", Ishwar Singh's description of the beautiful girl reminds the readers of uncomfortable male collective conscience regarding women:

...and there was one girl...she was so beautiful...I didn't kill her...I took her away.' [...] 'Kalwant Jani, I can't even begin to describe to you how beautiful she was...I could have slashed her throat but I didn't...I said to myself...Ishr Sian, you gorge yourself on Kalwant Kaur every day...how about a mouthful of this luscious fruit! [...] first I thought I would shuffle her a bit...but then I decided to trump her right away...' (36)

Manto challenges the readers to confront the moral rot of the era head-on by capturing the fractured, brutal realities of women's experiences during the Partition through his singular refusal to indulge in glorified descriptions as in the story "The Return". In the story, Manto explores the depth of human cruelty and societal indifference through the tragic experience of Sakina, a young girl separated from her family and subjected to abuse by those tasked with her protection. The story's traumatic climax occurs when Sakina's father, Sirajuddin, finally finds her, only to witness her instinctual response to the command "open it." Alex Tickell states that this reunion lays bare "the cruel irony of a society desensitized to violence," where Sakina's body has become an object of violation rather than safeguarding, underscoring her role as a casualty of Partition's communal failures (Tickell 358). Manto uses this moment to demonstrate how communal conflicts turn women's bodies into sites of exploitation, critiquing a society that allows women like Sakina to bear the brunt of its collective trauma.

Her behaviour illustrates how physical and psychological violation fragment identity, leaving her unable to distinguish between a safe environment and one of danger.

The complex narratives of Manto draw upon Sigmund Freud's concept of traumatic memory as a "psychic wound" that disrupts the self. Freud and Breuer's description of trauma as "a state of fright that continues to operate as a foreign body" resonates with Manto's depiction of female characters who, though rendered voiceless, still bear physical and psychological marks of their trauma (Freud and Breuer 6). In the story "The Return" as the doctor tells Sirajuddin to open the window, Sakina on hearing the command acts mechanically based on her memory. She does not utter a word, but simply performs the action commanded by the voice while lying lifelessly on the stretcher. The trauma, here, is also seen in the character of Sirajuddin, who is happy merely at the fact that his daughter is alive. "She is alive! My daughter is alive," Sirajuddin shouted with joy" (64). He has become ignorant and insensitive to the fact that her daughter has been raped and abused.

Sakina's fragmented response to her suffering becomes symbolic of the dissociative effect of trauma that Freud identified, where the mind splits to shield itself from the full weight of violence endured. This disassociation raises important questions about the nature of memory and identity in the wake of trauma. How do individuals reclaim their narrative when the act of remembering feels too heavily laden with pain? Sakina's reaction also embodies the heavy impact that trauma can have on one's sense of agency and control, highlighting how past experiences can hijack present responses, making individuals somewhat robotic in their actions. In examining these silences, Manto interrogates the cultural silencing that surrounds women's suffering. By portraying female characters that, though violated, refuse to surrender their dignity entirely, Manto presents a complex interplay of victimization and agency. This nuanced

portrayal allows his characters to exist beyond mere symbols of suffering, challenging both societal indifference and complicity in sustaining the structures that permit such violence. The portrayal of Sakina's violation by supposed rescuers speaks to the ethical collapse and normalization of sexual violence in crisis contexts.

Saadat Hasan Manto in his story, "Odour," explores the body through the sensory realm of olfaction, juxtaposing desire and revulsion. This sensory approach in the story aligns with psychoanalytic theories of latent desire and repressed sexuality. Manto's descriptions of smell and sensuality suggest how society regulates, censors, and often represses natural human impulses, further aligning with Freud's theories of repression and the dual nature of desire. The beginning of the story itself suggests desire and the commodification of women. "He was tired of being lonely [...] Before the war, Randhir had had several flings with the better-known hookers from the Nagpara area and the Taj Hotel" (80).

In "Odour," Manto departs from traditional portrayals of desire, employing olfactory elements to explore forbidden impulses that defy societal norms. Through odour, Manto unveils a realm of desire that eludes visual depiction, allowing the olfactory sense to act as a symbol for repressed and socially unacceptable urges. Alex Tickell observes that Manto's focus on sensory imagery reveals the "intensity of forbidden desire" while highlighting how the society attempts to suppress these impulses (Tickell 361).

In the story, the protagonist's attraction is awakened by an unexpected odour, symbolizing his latent desires and his simultaneous repulsion, which reflects societal constraints on sexuality. The olfactory sense in the story functions as a provocative metaphor for the boundary between social acceptability and private longing. By using odour as a

metaphor for desire, Manto critiques societal norms that attempt to suppress such feelings, thereby challenging conventional expectations regarding purity and sexuality. The olfactory triggers of Randhir in the story "Odour" represent a desire that resists moral confinement:

He looked at her again. Her white skin with scratch marks reminded him of milk gone bad. He recoiled from the perfume she exuded. His mind went back to that night when that dark girl had lain next to him, her odour overwhelming his senses. It was something that leapt out of her body at him with a primeval force, far sweeter than the perfume his bride wore. The dark girl's odour had penetrated his body like an arrow, he remembered. Randhir ran his hands over her white body but felt nothing. (83-84)

The protagonist, Randhir, is married to a beautiful, fair, and educated girl, yet he longs for the poor girl with the strange odour. As Sigmund Freud writes that the sensory perception is the process of using our senses to become aware of objects, relationships, and events around us. Although, abnormalities will arise in perception when there is an unconscious conflict between the inner desires and the forces repressing them. The concept of sensory perception of Freud supports Manto's use of smell to evoke subconscious desires. This idea aligns with Manto's portrayal in "Odour," where olfactory cues draw out emotions that the protagonist is otherwise unable to confront consciously. This approach enables Manto to convey a form of intimacy that goes beyond physical appearance, engaging with the essence of human attraction. Using odour to explore the character's suppressed impulses, Manto challenges traditional techniques of corporeal representation by emphasizing sensory rather than visual signals.

In the story "Odour", the protagonist Randhir finding the poor girl's body odour strangely pleasurable is symbolic of his suppressed desires, but he did not have the courage to marry her as she did not belong to his social class. His strong affinity towards the poor girl was strongly related to the scent of her sweat, which Randhir routinely detested. Cathy Caruth also talks on similar lines about sensory memory which adds depth to this reading of "Odour," suggesting that sensory experiences often access "hidden emotional layers," making them especially potent in revealing latent psychological conflicts (Caruth 19). The story, thus, becomes a narrative that questions not only the limits of societal expectations but also the boundaries of human perception itself, using sensory cues to illuminate the complex interplay between desire and repression. The writer examines the collision between public morality and private desire, exposing the inner conflicts that arise when personal impulses are constrained by social expectations.

Saadat Hasan Manto's portrayal of Randhir's internal struggle to suppress his desire for the poor girl highlights the hypocrisy embedded in societal views on sexuality. "Randhir ran his hands over her white body but felt nothing. [...] His bride was the daughter of a judge, a college graduate and the heartthrob of her fellow students, but for Randhir she may as well not have been there" (84). The olfactory trigger becomes an entry point into the protagonist's repressed urges, showing how cultural taboos transform natural impulses into forbidden, guilt-laden desires. The sensory-driven resurgence of emotion challenges societal expectations, forcing the protagonist into an internalized battle between self-restraint and hidden desire. In "Odour," Manto thus reveals how suppressed sexuality lingers beneath the surface of public morality, challenging readers to confront the deep-seated tension between individual desires and societal repression.

In both the stories, "Colder Than Ice" and "The Return," Manto delves into the brutal effects of Partition, using sexual violence to underscore the depersonalization and desensitization that communal trauma inflicts on individuals. Tickell notes that Manto's depiction of violence in these stories reveals the "depersonalization that communal violence imposes on individuals," highlighting how characters are stripped of their individuality and reduced to mere objects within a broader cultural clash (Tickell 358). This loss of individuality is central to both stories, where characters such as Sakina in "The Return" and Ishwar in "Colder Than Ice" are caught in a relentless cycle of objectification and brutality, illustrating how communal violence systematically dehumanizes its victims. "The young woman on the stretcher moved slightly. Her hands groped for the cord which kept her shalwar tied round her waist. With painful slowness, she unfastened it, pulled the garment down and opened her thighs" (63-64).

The emotional numbness of Ishwar in the story "Colder Than Ice" after his crime and Sakina's disassociation in "The Return" are not isolated experiences but rather symbols of a broader cultural apathy. Nafisa Zargar argues that Manto's stories reflect the "numbing of empathy," which emerges as a reaction to the profound losses inflicted by Partition, leading individuals to rationalize or ignore violence (Zargar 284). By portraying characters who are both victims and passive participants in their trauma, Manto exposes how Partition has stripped society of its ability to empathize. This erosion of empathy facilitates violence by removing the emotional barriers that typically inhibit such acts, making aggression seem an inevitable outcome of collective suffering. Alongside the desensitization issue, the stories "Colder Than Ice" and "The Return" offer a terrifying depiction of society's cooperation in sexual abuse. Ishwar's act of violence, driven by his inability to confront his emotions, reflects the

warped masculinity that emerges in times of crisis:

There was this house I broke into...there were seven people in there, six of them men whom I killed with my kirpan one by one...and there was one girl...she was so beautiful...I didn't kill her...I took her away [...] I said to myself [...] how about a mouthful of this luscious fruit! [...] first I thought I would shuffle her a bit...but then I decided to trump her right away... (36)

Therefore, Sakina's abuse in the story "The Return" exposes the darker side of community protection, where those expected to rescue her instead contribute to her suffering. As Tickell suggests, Manto's works dissect how communal violence reduces individuals to tools of revenge, with victims bearing the consequences of communal resentment that targets them as proxies for collective suffering (Tickell 358).

In the two stories, "The Return" and "Colder Than Ice," Manto's characters, caught between survival and trauma, reflect a society that has become indifferent to the sanctity of the human body and spirit. Manto's portrayal of sexual violence in the two stories serves as a narrative tool to examine the psychological residue of Partition, suggesting that communal violence depletes not only physical lives but also the ethical and emotional frameworks that sustain society. Through these stories, Manto confronts readers with the harrowing effects of cultural numbness, urging a recognition of the ways in which violence, when left unchecked, devastates both individual and collective humanity.

The portrayal of female characters by Saadat Hasan Manto shows a nuanced exploration of agency and silence in the face of victimization. His stories "The Return", and "Colder Than Ice" highlight how women, despite enduring physical and psychological violence, often navigate their suffering with a resilience that complicates traditional feminist

perspectives on agency. In both the stories, Manto's female protagonists are subject to traumatic exploitation, yet their silence and survival reflect a form of quiet defiance against a patriarchal society that expects their subjugation. Sattar and others argue that these characters exhibit "a resilience that redefines traditional notions of female agency," using silence as a subtle form of resistance (217). Through his female characters' silence, Manto illustrates a resilience that, rather than conforming to victimhood, resists societal expectations, suggesting that agency can exist even in seemingly passive forms.

In the story "The Return," Sakina's silence is significant; her inability to respond conventionally to her trauma does not render her powerless. Instead, her silence represents an inner strength that survives where words might fail. The trauma she endures is brutal, yet her quiet endurance reflects an unspoken resistance to fully succumbing to her suffering. While, in "Colder Than Ice," the absence of a female voice in Ishwar's memory of violence serves as a haunting reminder of the muted agency women possess even in victimhood. Sattar and others describe this resilience as a form of "agency through silence," suggesting that the ability to endure without surrendering entirely to trauma is, in itself, an act of resilience within a patriarchal society (217).

The silencing of women's trauma is not merely a narrative technique but Manto's commentary on societal desensitization. Manto's female characters, though resilient, operate within a culture that fails to recognize or validate their suffering, revealing a society more interested in self-preservation than in addressing the moral wounds of its own making. By denying women a voice, society distances itself from the reality of its own violence, creating a cycle of silence that both allows and perpetuates abuse. Through these silent survivors, Manto's work not only critiques societal failures but also calls for a

deeper understanding of the sense of control and resilience in the context of systemic trauma.

In "Colder Than Ice," "The Return," and "Odour," Manto exposes the inextricable link between sexuality, exploitation, and the human body, portraying a society fractured by moral decay, desensitization, and the struggle for survival. By presenting the human body in various states such as violated, silent, or sensory; he constructs a narrative backdrop rich in themes of trauma that not only reflects individual suffering but also critiques the societal structures that render such suffering invisible.

Thus, Saadat Hasan Manto's unflinching portrayals of gendered trauma during the Partition remain disturbingly relevant in today's world, where female body continues to bear the weight of communal, cultural, and institutional violence. His stories not only record past atrocities but also illuminate the persistent patterns of silencing, moral collapse, and emotional numbness that shape our present. Hence, Manto's narratives can serve as potential tools in trauma studies and literary pedagogy, helping students, readers, and researchers not merely to recognize the lingering aftereffects of historical violence but also to understand the ethical demands of remembrance, empathy, and justice in the fractured contemporary world.

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