Saadat Hasan Manto’s Women Heroes: Seeking Truth in Persuasion

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Abstract
Saadat Hasan Manto, the most controversial Urdu short story writer of the post Premchand period, presented his women in a unique way that no other Urdu writer had done so far. Where the ordinary Muslim women or other lower class women were not the usual subjects of his contemporary authors, Manto took the very opportunity to engrave their struggle for identity in an andocentric world which offers no easy outs to women. They come to us as a series of new women who are not only the puny sex object, but also full of morality and vitality. When the Indo Pakistan partition enthralled these two countries, many women were brutally raped or forced to prostitution. Many women lost their families forever, sometimes they submitted themselves to the patriarchal society as there was no other hope left, but their minds have neither been made effeminate by the harsh reality. The proposed study focuses on some of Manto’s popular women protagonists. The short stories that I shall focus on are Manto’s “Khol Do”; “The Mice of Shah Daulah”; “By the Roadside”; “Licence”; “Mozail”; “Ten Rupees”. Manto’s women are from various social strata and different religious background, but their voices are mostly identical. They come on the very equal plane while presenting their sad predicament which makes their existence more plausible. Actually Manto wanted to investigate the grave social and emotional bonds which shackle these women day by day. His unembellished directness makes the readers not only sympathize with those women, but also considers them as the paradigms of the real feminine heroes of mankind who can subvert the notion of the traditional “Romantic heroes”.

Key words: Urdu short story, women protagonists, partition, feminine heroes

1. Introduction
The present paper tries to venture with some of the women protagonists of S. H. Manto’s short stories. Saadat Hasan Manto, the most controversial Urdu writer, is the representative of cosmopolitan humanism. Like other popular short story writers of the post-Premchand period, as Bedi, Chughtai, Mufti, Manto was different from them for his presentation of women. According to Narang, there were two kinds of short stories in vogue which were sociological and psychological representation of society (Narang, 1973). Though others’ stories are filled with the suffering, enduring and compromising of such women, Manto was interested in the presentation of the darkness of the society and in this process women came to us as more vivid as well as dramatic, more realistic and ecstatic. His stories represent the teenage girls, housewives, as well as the ‘bazaar women’ simultaneously and they appear as recalcitrant and righteous, even when the society is far against them. They are like ‘the ambiguous metaphor for humanity’ (Rumi, 2012) by which he wanted to unravel the seamy side of the contemporary society. Each of Manto’s heroine acts in order to improve or change her status or the status of others. Sakina, the teenage girl of the story “Khol Do”, Nesti from “Licence” may become the victims of the hunger of male chauvinists; their energy and determination become the ideal instances for those who voice their dissent through their recognition of and resistance to male dominance. “The Mice of Shah Daulah”, derives from a mother’s despair, is also a scathing attack on contemporary society and superstitious people that can snatch away a baby from a mother’s lap. “By the Roadside” is also an elegy to a mother and her illegitimate baby.
“Mozail” and “Ten Rupees” break away the stereotypical imagery of sex-workers and humiliate the readers by which they never relegate these women to the positions of subservience and submission. Though Manto was the most anthologized Urdu short story writer and as most of his stories focus on the women at the time of partition and post-partition trauma, his women protagonists are very much unique in essence. Actually these women came out of his fancy only to obtain a firm ground for their own right. In this way Manto’s short stories are very much realistic in essence. The reality of life’s complexity, inner truth and their vibrant emotions are exposed bitterly. Besides, it was a period of suffocation-- suffocation in the name of religion, politics and of tradition. He did not beautify the ugliness of them by which he totally disrobed a so-called ‘respectable’ society that was already exposed.

2. Objective

Sadaat Hasan Manto’s short stories are most debated in the genre of partition literature. But there are only a few research works related to his portrayal of women characters in short stories. Manto dexterously presented his women characters from various social strata and played havoc with them unto the last. In this paper I want to discuss some of Manto’s well-known women heroes from different perspectives.

3. Discussion

As Maupassant said that story telling is a favourite pastime of all human beings, mankind loves to hear stories from ancient age. Actually stories become part of our lives. In the words of K.S. Duggal, “It is short story which best portrays the peculiar personality of the modern man. It can be as poetic as poetry, as dramatic as any drama and yet protect life in a narrative form. Short story can even be without the story in it. It is short because the sensibility of the modern man does not accept long drawn-out yarns” (Duggal, 1975).

S.H. Manto’s story telling method touched the hearts of many, with the convincing and utterly original portrayal of human fallibility. His forte was short story which exposes the brutal frankness of the contemporary Indian and Pakistani society. Manto came into prominence after 1936 with his ability to narrate the most blood-curdling events of partition era. In the forty-three years of his lifespan he published twenty-two collections of short stories, one novel, some other radio plays and essays, as well as two collections of sketches of famous personalities. Born in a Kashmiri Islamic family Manto raised in Punjab and took the life of a gambler in his youth. In time he went to Bombay in search for work and became a film journalist and a scriptwriter also for a short period. In 1948 he migrated to Pakistan and lived the rest of the life there. Most of the provocative stories were written in the last period of his life when the dark shadow overwhelmed not only his personal life but also over the subcontinent too. These dark stories dexterously unravel the veil from its surface which the contemporary society restricts or inhibits.

Having read Manto in driblets over a longish period of time and then selecting some of his short stories for this paper, it can be said that Manto wrote about the whole mankind by taking his characters from all categories. Though this paper depicts some of his women characters, it must be said that Manto’s women emanate from various social strata and different religious background, but their voices are the same. The cumulative burden of domesticity, routine-sickness, and the anticipation of death are sensitively portrayed by these women. As they are suffering from almost the same problem, their stories give us the same message through multiple perspectives. They all want to be free, free from the norms, free from this subcontinental society though they are homemakers or sex workers. If we discuss some of his short stories we can differentiate those women from that of other contemporary feministic writers. Those women characters, the ‘other’ part of a society, are marginalized and traumatized as well. Sometimes the trauma of the partition is so powerful that they totally change their notion and prepare for the sojourn to a new world.
The story “Khol Do” translated as *She is Alive*, is rated as his greatest by Manto himself. In the story, the teenage girl Sakina, a girl who faces the violence of partition, is now habituated to forced sexuality. Like every conscious and dutiful father Sirajuddin also wanted to protect her from the dark side of the society. But his all effort ended in smoke. His daughter also immersed in the turmoil of 1947 riots. The story begins with the snapshot of a pre-partition India. Sirajuddin loses his beautiful daughter Sakina on their journey from Amritsar to Lahore. In riot-ravaged Lahore Sirajuddin has also lost his wife whose murder appears before his very eyes all the time like a nightmare. His wife assured him to do not worry about her and advised to take away Sakina from there. So he cannot leave Sakina in this way and wants her back in any condition. At last the abducted Sakina is found by her father in a hospital where she is admitted with her traumatized state. Actually his daughter became a victim of gang rape by her abductors as well as her rescuers. The innocent teenage girl is alive physically, but her soul is immersed wholly. Ravages may take away her conscience, but her distressful father is happy to get back his daughter physically alive. The ending of the story is so touching that everybody becomes sympathetic to the father and his beloved daughter:

“The doctor glanced at the body lying on the stretcher. He felt that the pulse and, pointing at the window, told Sirajuddin, “Open it!” Sakina’s body stirred ever so faintly on the stretcher. With lifeless hands, she slowly undid the knot of her waistband and lowered her salwar.

“She’s alive! My daughter is alive!” Old Sirajuddin screamed with unbounded joy.

The doctor broke into a cold sweat”( Jalal, 2012).

This story is perhaps the best story of Manto in which he uses women and the gang rape as the metaphor to highlight the barbarity of 1947 era, a clear echo of Bapsi Sidwa’s *Ice Candy Man*, where the Hindu “Aayah” had lost her fiancé forever and forced to go with the Muslim “Ice-Candy-Man”. The present-day Bengali filmmaker Srijit Mukherjee also has taken the story “Khol Do” as the opening scene of his most rewarding movie *Rajkahini* where Amina, the traumatized village girl, leaves the viewers almost numb. Another notable riot story is “Lajwanti” by Rajinder Singh Bedi where Lajwanti, a social worker’s wife, was became the victim of gang rape. While her husband, who rescues other females and helps to get back their family, the wife, was abducted and he treats her very sympathetically to allow her to unburden herself to him. Finally she comes out of the trauma and they lives happily ever after. Manto sarcastically described those abducted women’s wretchedness in his another riot based short story “By God”:

“Whenever I thought of these abducted women and girls, all I could see were swollen, distended bellies. What would happen to these bellies? Who is the owner of that which lies stuffed in these bellies – India or Pakistan? And what of the nine months of labour? Who would pay the wages – India or Pakistan? Or would it all simply be put in the account of cruel Nature? Isn’t there a blank column somewhere in this ledger?”(Jalil, 2008).

Manto’s women are sometimes like common femme-au-foyer, the agent of day-to-day household. In“The Mice of Shah Daulah” the barren woman Salima went to the shrine of Shah Daulah in want of a child. Although her desire was fulfilled, the superstition caught her with its extreme grip and she had to offer her firstborn child to the shrine as the compensation of it. In the Islamic mythology the women who pray intensely to the tomb, are blessed with a child. According to a legend dating back hundreds of years a woman who's unable to conceive may become fertile by offering prayers here. But she can expect her first-born to be handicapped, a rat child with a tiny head and it must be handed over to the shrine. The legend is very much alive as God would punish anyone who did not honour their commitment. Manto’s Salima is like a few other simple village women who are not properly aware of this kind of superstitions and sometimes their unawareness harms both them and their whole family. Those poor village women have to consider this as their fate and repent for their lost in complete desolation. In the present story we find Salima, a twenty-one year woman, married five years back and still had no baby. Her mother and
mother-in-law were extremely worried and they frighten her that Najeeb, her husband, will surely bring a second wife. She consulted some doctors but her condition cannot change still. Then she came to know about the shrine of Shah Daulah Sahab from her friend Fatima who also abandoned her first-born there. It was unbearable to Salima who could not imagine a mother who can sacrifice her first child in this way if her child is born with a tiny head or flat nose or beady eyes. But circumstance insisted her to try this method to fill her lap with many children. She makes a mannat in the shrine and miracle happened. Within two months she found herself pregnant and gave birth to a baby after a few days. But according to the condition she must abandon her baby at the shrine and she did her duty within time. Poor, heart-broken Salima was traumatized after that and every time she saw her rat child entering a rat’s hole, everywhere she found the black mole and sometimes the saint appeared to him to tear off her flesh. After one year a daughter was born to her and later two sons came in her lap. Now she was about to forget her first baby. But one day she found her lost son with a tamashawalla. Her womb cried for her son and finally she struck a deal of Rs 500 to get her son back. But the rat child had fled away forever:

“Salima’s womb kept calling out to Mujeeb, beseeching him to come back. But he was gone, never to return.” (Jalil, 2008).

C. S. Lakshmi, in discussing images of women in Tamil literature, comments, "Wife, mother, beloved ... a woman cannot reject, forsake or escape from suffering. It would be falling out of step. Epics have been made by suffering women. Happy women do not make history."(Lakshmi, 1985). The present story voices over the problem of the marginalized, the women, the most passive sufferer of contemporary society. Salima’s heart-felt desire to adore her son Mujeeb hindered by the society bound in thread of superstition. Ultimately superstition and superstitious people subvert the notion of a mother’s longing, her fulfillment, moreover, her responsibility towards her son.

Manto celebrated motherhood in another short story named “By the Roadside”. The story is, according to Rakshanda Jalil, “a beautiful elegy to a mother forced to abandon her illegitimate baby” (Jalil, 2008). The mother, who has to face a series of changes in her body and suffer the extreme level of pangs to give birth to a baby, sometimes loses the right of her baby. Meyers comments that the choice of whether or not to have children has the most profound impact on modern women’s lives. But “Through motherhood decisions... women assume an indelible moral identity and incur or disavow various caregiving obligations” (Jalil, 2008). She also focuses on motherhood and abortion on modern women’s right to choice and such a discourse is summed up in the decision that state “A woman is not a woman until she has had a child”(Jalil, 2008). This story is also a delicate pen-picture of Manto which depicts the ‘real’ psychological as well as physical trauma of the mother whose baby is snatched away from her lap and tossed on a roadside garbage heap. As a typical Italian painter he puts emphasis on woman anatomy when he described the pregnant woman’s physical changes. Perhaps he has written this story under a woman’s skin. Such a vivid and lively description of the would-be mother harks back to the very concept of matrigynoidolatory:

“But why are the empty spaces in my body filling up? What is this debris that is filling up the dips and hollows of my body? What is this susurration that is coursing through my blood? Why is it gathering monumentum and racing towards one single spot in my womb? Why has my sunken boat bobbed up to row across unknown seas?

Who is this unknown guest for whom milk is being warmed on raging fires inside my body? Why is my heart carding my blood to prepare baby-soft blankets, and for whom? Why is my mind weaving new clothes out of my multi-coloured thoughts, and for whom?
Why am I looking better, more glowing, by the day? Why are the hiccups, trapped in every part and fiber of my body, turning into lullabies? . . . Whose footprint is this that I feel deep inside my belly?” (Jalil, 2008).

This story is sometimes distinguishes from Manto’s other stories in projection of its narrative structure. Where the other stories are written in third person narrative, the present one has both third person and first person narrative. The dexterous presentation of the first person narrative brings out the pangs of a would-be mother and here lies his mastery.

Sometimes Manto’s women are both ‘subject’, as well as ‘predicate’. In “Mozail” Manto represented a Bombay bohemian girl, Jewish in religion, named Mozail. Though she is Jewish by birth, but hates sectarianism, caring a little for conventional morality, and prefers to spend a carefree nonconformist life. Her rude behavior sometimes surprises the readers, but ultimately the can find her heart, full of sympathy for her fellow human beings. Tarlochan had fallen in love with Mozail “love up to the knees” (Hasan, 2007) since his college days. But now he is in love with another girl belonging to his own religion. The setting of the story is riotous Bombay when the Hindu-Muslim-Sikh conflicts tearing apart the nation. Circumstance brought Tarlochan, the sardar, and his beloved Kirpal Kaur in an awful situation that they had no other option in their hands rather than forsaking their lives to the rioters. Here comes Mozail as a fairy godmother to rescue this Sikh couple with all her efforts. When Muslim rioters attacked the Sikh girl, she succeeds in saving her but she herself was fatally injured. Her beauty is fully consumed by a patriarchal society when she was standing naked in front of the rioters to make them bewildered, and to hinder them from getting Kirpal and Tarlochan. When she was lying in the blood, breathing her last, Tarlochan came to her to cover her naked, bruised body with his turban. At that time also she tried to protect Tarlochan from the rioters who were suspicious with the turban by calling him actually “a bloody Muslim” but quite crazy that she always called him “a Sikh”. She succeeds in her mission and also keeps her morality to the end of her life. When Tarlochan wanted to cover her body with his turban, Mozail’s stark reply was:

“Take away this rag of your religion. I don’t need it” (Hasan, 2007).

Her realistic attitude to life and her own ethics made her one of Manto’s rare women characters who “overruns her religious learnings to save lives of two individuals of a different faith.” (Rumi, 2012). Lee Edwards suggests, instead of the word 'heroine,' which she feels is a subordinate term, the use of “woman or female hero”: ... the woman hero uncovers fractures in the surface of reality, contradictions in its structure, gaps in its social ideology . . . questions the conventional associations of gender and behavior (that) women are innately selfless, weak or passive. (Edwards, 1984). Here Mozail, the “woman hero”, stands for those women who cannot bother their lives for some positive values for the whole society. The story truly differs from the others of Manto’s, in the words of G.S. Narang, “in that it treats both the ignoble and the noble.” (Narang, 1973).

The story of an independent girl was almost absent in contemporary Urdu literature. But Manto’s women are sometimes too liberal for too long and stiff on the ground. According to the noted Urdu poet and writer Fahmida Riaz, Manto “saw women the way he saw men.”(Riaz, 2006). Sometimes he wrote like a women’s point of view as if he brazenly celebrates the victory of the so-called hypocritical patriarchal society with apparently a tone of satire. In the story “Licence” Nesti, a coachman’s wife, fights for her own right. After her husband’s death she was in dire need and everybody wanted to grab this opportunity. Dino, the colleague of her husband Abu, wanted to marry her. But she rejected those horrendous offers and plunged into an unknown world. She drove her coach herself to earn her livelihood which was too much unbearable to the male authority. When the municipal committee men called her and snatched her licence, the reason behind this was too silly to depict. According to them, a lady cannot drive a coach and she cannot walk along with her male competitors simultaneously. A young destitute girl can only find her right value in a “bazaar” by making herself as a “spot”:
“She sold the horse and carriage for whatever she could get and went straight to Abu’s grave. For a moment, she stood next to it in silence. Her eyes were completely dry, like the blaze after a shower, robbing the earth of all its moisture. Her lips parted and she addressed the grave, ‘Abu, your Nesti died today in the committee office.’

With this, she went away. The next day she submitted her application. She was given a licence to sell her body” (Taseer, 2008).

Alas, a helpless woman ultimately submitted herself to the gigantic power of society. The traditional *purdah* system, according to Maria Mies, is part of the same patriarchal ideology that considers women as property in need of protection, reduces them to their sexual function. (Mies, 1980). He did not want to make Nesti a “hero”, his only intension is here to paint a very realistic picture of such robust but hard-working women from contemporary society. His brutal directness towards the society is the most favourite part of his story-telling method which many women writers of Manto’s generation have applauded so much. His portraiture of the vivid reality help women by providing them with the dignity they were deprived of for such a long time. It also empowers readers to rethink the cultural stereotypes as well as their individual idiosyncrasies.

Again in the story “Ten Rupees”, one of the famous stories from his *Bombay Stories*, Sarita, a teenage girl, represents the true humanity of a public woman. In *Bombay Stories* Manto observes and reports to us the lives of those in the underbelly of contemporary Bombay (now Mumbai). The present story is the pen-picture of a popular *chawl*, set in Bombay in the 30s and 40s, and its residents. On the time of partition there were a large number of refugees who were in hand-to-mouth condition and sold their own daughters and sisters or those girls were forced to please their “Shahab”. Those little girls were nip in buds. When Sarita is at the age of playing doll with other children of the *chawl*, she had given instruction to take proper care to the customers. As a part-time prostitute, she is paid by hours for her ‘outings’ with the men. The temporal pleasure of getting food and travelling in a car totally charmed over her and she is totally ignorant of her future. Her mother and Kishori, the agent of her, put this very duty on her:

“...In the meantime, her mother arrived. She did Sarita’s hair quickly and said, ‘Listen, darling, speak nicely to the men and do whatever they ask. They are important; they’ve come in a motor car.’ Then addressing Kishori, she said, ‘Now hurry up, take her to them. Poor fellows, I don’t know how long they’ve been left waiting.’” (Taseer, 2008).

As other teenage girls Sarita also wanted to sing songs from Bollywood films and wanted to copy Devika Rani to please her customers as well as herself also. But those customers pay no heed to her inborn, inherent talent and wanted to fulfill their pleasure in lieu of a ten rupees note which a fixed rate for her body. The innocent girl inside Sarita cried for receiving such applaud from her “Shahab”. At last when she got the self-satisfaction and so much pampers from Shahab, Kafayat and Anwar, her loyalty made her return the ten rupees note to Shahab. Though it was her income and livelihood for the whole family she could not take this money without fulfilling her duty. To a prostitute her customer’s satisfaction is all the above. Here Sarita enjoyed to the extreme only herself, not pleased her customers fully. Then how could she take the money from them? The representative of lower-class society girl Sarita’s loyalty jeopardized the upper-class society Shahab’s cheap mentality. An insightful Urdu essay by Najma Manzoor entitled “Manto, Aurat Aur Waris Alvi” states:

“He (Manto) raised the character of a prostitute…and familiarizes the reader with the humanity of women. His portrayals of domesticated women and prostitutes are unique for he associates unconventional attributes – for example, determination, will, not being content in every situation and above all the ability to laugh. But Manto also showed ‘real’ men who were unconventional and sensitive….” (Manzoor, 2006) and for this reason readers “consider him to be a mature feminist” (Riaz, 2006).
4. Conclusion

It has been noted by many that in the short stories like “Ten Rupees”, “The Mice of Shah Daulah”, “Mozail”, “By the Roadside” Manto drew upon the exotic to discuss their quest for fulfillment. Particularly these stories suggest the women’s personal feelings of longing, loss and misery are part of the collective experiences of the marginalized. The epitome of the Ideal Woman which has been held up for the contemporary Indian woman is in the epic mode. When the topic is about his realistic writings I can say that he is the most prolific Urdu writer till now is his subjects like exploitation, greed, corruption, lust which lark everywhere in his stories. Although Manto wrote obsessively about sex his presentation is also very realistic and so we cannot consider this as pornographic. Critics also told upon this:

“Sex operated on two levels in Manto's stories. On one level he brought out the inconsistencies of life through sex. On yet another level sex became a means of protest. This protest was clearly neither a moral one nor the fashionable economic one of his period - he was not concerned with economic issues even in his stories dealing with prostitutes.” (Akhtar & Leslie, 1985).

This “perfect realist” sometime considers as the Maupassant of Urdu literature and it becomes the hallmark of Manto’s œuvre. To quote M. Faguet on Maupassant, “le lecteur c'est ce qu'il faut, quand il lit Maupassant, si c’est de passant, ou seulement de la vérité. qu'il a le gout” (René, 2016), in such a point Manto’s vision directe differentiates him from his contemporary writers. Suffice it to say, Bedi’s touch of sanctity, sincere and sympathetic representation of women differentiates his highly neurotic, the violent, above all the idealization of women, as that of Chekhov from Maupassant. His regard for humanity, great feeling and empathy for the destitute, constancy in truth, along with his great sense of humour always hark back to K.N.Daruwala’s words:

“Manto’s commitment to truth was so passionate and complete that it has to go unchallenged... His heart was in the right place invariably, and his scorn for the hypocritical and the sanctimonious was unmitigated.” (Daruwala, 1989).

However, his stories may be controversial till now, but the voices of such women heroes are undoubtedly rare in contemporary Indian literature. If we contemplate over those famous lines written by Manto himself on his own epitaph before his final sojourn to an unknown world, one may undoubtedly detect those stone- carved letters sarcastically bring out his greatness: “Here lies Saadat Hasan Manto and with him lie buried all the secrets and mysteries of the art of short-story writing . . . still wondering who among the two is the greater short-story writer: God or he.”

References


