

Revisiting Manto's *Bombay Stories* from a gendered perspective

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Much of literary criticism has been concerned with the voice of the subaltern- the voices relegated to the margins and the need to voice the thoughts and concerns of the silent, the absent and of the voices trapped in the liminal space between the subjective and the objective. This ambiguous space between the subjective and the objective has been fodder for much contention, which gets even more problematized when contextualized in terms of the subaltern individual. How can you render a subaltern experience subjectively, from a position of power? There is always the danger of slipping into self conscious posturing while attempting to do so. Saadat Hassan Manto's stories are exceptional in this sense because most of the time he gets it right without trying too hard. He chronicles the lives of the people inhabiting the outer fringes of the society with journalistic precision and most importantly, a sincerity of vision. Even though he gets pretty involved with his characters, he does not try to moralize or theorize their condition in any way. He chronicles their lives, telling their unique stories which stems mostly from the deep personal interactions, he had with them. Most of his characters, even the fictionalized accounts have strong resemblances to the lives of the people he encountered in Bombay. In a number of his stories, there is an impending sense of immediacy with which one confronts a truly degenerate society; where women are unremittingly commodified in deference to the demand and supply rule that was and still is, symptomatic of the contemporary condition.

This paper looks at Manto as one of the most important voices, writing during his time. His writing transcended the barriers of caste, class and gender. Contrary to Spivak's ¹claim where she staggeringly announces that the subaltern cannot speak in the end, I do not feel that the subaltern

1. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty., (1988), Can the Subaltern Speak? in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg., ed., (1988), Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, Board of trustees of University of Illinois, USA.

subject always need to invoke the legitimacy accorded to its existence or its ability to speak in order to be a subject of post colonial analysis. In fact Manto's stories question this very divisiveness of the society that we live in - of looking at the subaltern as distinct socio-political classes. As Somdev Banik² (2009) argues, subalterns are not specific to the post-colonial period and it is wrong to look at them as a homogeneous group, characterized only by their marginalization. He further observes that vernacular literature all over India abound with the experiences of the subaltern with many celebrated writers like Premchand taking the lead.

Coming back to Manto's women characters, which achieves singular distinction throughout the wide expanse of his literary oeuvre; because of the way his most memorable protagonists, negotiate with remarkable dignity the subaltern niches they are pushed into, clawing their way back, making their voices heard and their presence felt with their dignity intact. These are women as Sukrita Paul Kumar points out inhabiting " the infernal underworld invisible to the respectable society which pretends ignorance of its existence."³ I have mainly decided to look into his stories that is focally situated in the city of Bombay. This has been a calculated choice, something that I will explore in more detail in this paper.

In a patriarchal society like ours, women have always been regarded as objects of desire and as the embodiment of male sexual agency. The woman's body becomes the conduit, through which male supremacy is established. It is also the woman's body which is the site of conflict as it becomes the battleground on which the myth of honour and power is played out- something that is explicitly articulated during the time of the partition. Manto demonstrates extraordinary

2. Banik, Somdev., (2009), Giving the Lie: Ingenuity in Subaltern Resistance in Premchand's Short Story 'The Shroud', Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities (ISSN 0975-2935), Volume I, Number 2, Autumn.

³ Kumar, Sukrita Paul. "Surfacing from within : Fallen women in Manto's Fiction." . Web. 1st November, 2014.

sensitivity, almost an androgynous sensibility in the way he chronicles the inner psyche of the exploited subject. Vandana Shukla remarks about Manto: "...he continued to unmask the world by never allowing his pen to be obscured by the convenience of compromise."⁴ (Vandana Shukla, *The Tribune*.) He wrote about the private conflicts faced by men and women due to their sexual frustrations and of taboos and their consequences, about unrequited love leading to jealousy which further led to the torture of women. He, being a champion of the cause of women listened to their unspoken longings and aspirations, hitherto unattended and highlighted very pointedly the sexual subjugation they were subjected to, becoming some sort of a male crusader. His stories occupy the grey area, because he dares to tread those spaces where other men would not because of the implicit guilt that comes from being complicit in a society that dehumanizes women, robbing them off their agency. Manto does not tread lightly, an iconoclast in his own times, he is the lone crusader who takes it upon him to expose the hypocrisy of the society he lived in. He is a successful architect of this grey zone, which neither subsumes nor excludes the external world but mirrors its complexities even as it subverts its accepted code of ethics, where subaltern and mainstream do not become separate categories but distinctly overlap. He plunges into the sordid underbelly of the city of Bombay, celebrating the human at every tread. He looked at women in the same way he looked at men, exposing the eccentricities of human existence for both the sexes without trying to glorify either. He wrote relentlessly about women in his stories because he understood how society was unfair to them and it was his own way of committing to their cause- a lone crusader during his times who celebrated the human above everything else. He deliberately forced onto the mainstream consciousness, his social critique

⁴ Shukla, Vandana. 'Owned by the Disowned', *The Tribune*, May 14, 2012.

Dr. Dashrath Ghat. "Feminist concerns through fleshy designs: A Revisit to Saadat Hasan Manto's short stories." *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*. ISSN 0976-8165. Web. 1st November, 2014.

which was also a plea for everyone to sit up and take notice of the atrocities being perpetrated around him. While it may be problematic to celebrate the "human" in every character without taking in the nuances of caste, class and gender underpinnings, Manto's commitment lay in the very fact that he tried to expose the society he lived in, by chronicling the lives of the people he encountered on a daily basis. He does not colour his narrative with any kind of excesses. He is always hovering in the background- always within reach. He narrates the lives of his characters from the way he sees them. He was not someone who judged them for what they were- but rather he tried to recognize the dignity of life in each and every person he encountered.

Bombay always had a special significance for Manto. The partition ensured that Manto go to Pakistan. He wrote in *Yazid*⁵ in 1952, recalling his life in Bombay, fondly remembering the city as a beautiful thing to have happened to him. The partition showed an atmosphere poisoned by an unabated cycle of killings and violence and a madness which Manto had thought to be a temporary one but which reached chronic proportions, had gripped the country. Newspapers were rife with reports of all kinds of violence, including rapes and random killings. Cities were unsettled and *Bombay Talkies* (cinema-house), where Manto worked, was also witnessing strong tensions between the Hindu and Muslim workers. Manto's friends Ashok Kumar and Shyam were both victimized in many ways but Manto never let the religious turbulence interfere with his choice of relationship with his friends. His fiction captured the 'Holi' that was being played in a subcontinent caught in the throes of madness, in the name of religion and freedom struggle. Manto recognized the failures of the nation and adequately portrayed it in his fiction, raising pertinent questions about the construction of a nation and the values of its people or the lack of it.

⁵ Kumar, Rakesh. "'My own personal Manto': A tribute to Saadat Hasan Manto from across the border", *The Express Tribune, Sunday Magazine Feature*, May13,2012

It is impossible to write about Bombay or to talk about Bombay without being moved. Be it ardent love or seething hatred, the city is bound to elicit some response which will leave even the most seasoned pessimist and crippling cynic moved. Bombay with its love for the expansive can only be articulated in sweeping gestures- through emotions that soar and plummet at every turn. Such is the beauty of the city. Bombay, now known as Mumbai (the journey between these two names have been extensively documented) is as much a myth as it is a reality. As a city it is so inextricably linked to Indian cinema that it is impossible to separate the two and view them independently without unconsciously conflating the two. It is as much a figment of popular imagination and the auteur's vision as a real, thriving city housing people from every walk of life and social strata. It is the melting pot of all cultures, where worlds collide and elide in perfect symphony- a true cosmopolitan metropolis in every sense of the term. It is in this city where some of his most famous works are situated- but Manto does not write about Bombay or talk about Bombay in sweeping gestures- he records the real lives of the people he encounters, chronicling their stories as he sees it with journalistic precision without slipping into any kind of sentimental posturing. Manto casts a spotlight on Bombay's darker corners, neighbourhoods "dotted with garbage heaps that served as an open toilet".⁶ His Bombay is highly cosmopolitan, inhabited by individuals who revere Marlene Dietrich's Hollywood beauty as well as the great Urdu poet Ghalib. Some are inebriated writers trying to make their way in the city's nascent film industry and a fictionalized version of Manto himself, makes several cameo appearances. In such first-person narratives, the author lapses into playful, self-referential musings on the art of storytelling.

⁶ Hasan Manto, Saadat, Matt Reeck, and Aftab Ahmad. "Ten Rupees." *Bombay Stories*. Gurgaon, Haryana: Random House India, 2014. 14. Print.

Manto's *Bombay* stories contain some of his famous stories such as *Bu or odour*, *Insult or Hatak*, *Mozail*, *Babu Gopinath*, *shiraz* and *Khushiyan* amongst others. What is exceptional about the stories is the way, in which he invokes the subaltern subject in his stories-etching them out as real flesh and blood characters, capable of erring and transcending their physical limitations at the same time. Manto appraises the society that he lived in with exceptional clarity, exposing the hypocrisy of the times while trying to identify the human, even in the basest detail. His *Bombay* stories take on the mantle of feminism with as much sincerity as he tries to grapple with the issues of masculinity. In fact what becomes clear from his works is that in order to understand feminity, one also needs to understand and be equally empathetic about what constitutes masculinity. Patriarchy is as much debilitating for men as it is for women- a concern that is echoed by Manto in myriad ways throughout his stories and essays. In the course of this paper, due to time constraints I am going to look into three stories- three stories out of the fourteen that has been anthologized in his *Bombay* stories. The stories have been selected, keeping in mind the various concerns that Manto upholds about constructions of gender and sexuality in his stories.

Khushiya which chronicles the life of the eponymous protagonist , is centered around the pivotal moment when he awakens to his sexuality. It is interesting that this is the first story anthologized in this book because this story posits a very important question- what exactly constitutes the notion of masculinity and to what extent can Manhood be quantified. Khusiyan is a pimp who has been involved in the flesh trade for quite some years now. What renders him as a subaltern subject is the fact that he is as much marginalized by the society that he lives in, as much as the prostitutes he endorses. His choice of profession excludes him and he is looked at with the same distrust and contempt as one would bestow on a prostitute. Interestingly, this does not posit much

conflict in him as much as it does, when the prostitute Kanta, negates his sexual agency by refusing to stand fully clothed in front of him. This becomes a climactic point in the story- one that raises a storm within Khushiyan, as he tries to come to terms with his sense of self and the way it was so casually disregarded by Kanta, who is according to Khushiyan supposed to be subservient to him because of her doubly marginalized status- one that stems from her being a prostitute and in addition a woman. Even in the subaltern world, there are gender hierarchies that need to be maintained- something that is pithily observed by Manto in the way Khushiyan is unsettled by Kanta's action or rather her inaction in not covering herself appropriately. Even in a space, that is already situated in a liminal zone- there is no scope for universals. Manto also shows how repressed desires and the inability to negotiate them drive an individual to commit reprehensible transgressions. Khushiyan who before that point of Kanta's unintended insult was perfectly in control over his individuality, suddenly finds his masculinity questioned- why because a woman had attempted to take him lightly? Hence, there is a growing urgency within him to reassert his masculinity by reconfiguring his idea of self first. And how does Khushiyan attempt to do that- by trying to occupy a position of control. It is interesting how the story opens with Khushiyan across the backdrop of a *paan* stall and an auto supply store- in the clutter of tyres and miscellaneous parts- a *misce-en-scene* that is predominantly male, rooted in the public. Interestingly by the end of the story, Khushiyan progresses to taking control of the taxi as he kidnaps Kanta and drives her off to an unknown, uncertain future; all in an effort to assert his masculinity that had been put to question by the unknowing Kanta. Manto does not disclose what happens to the pair, deliberately keeping the readers guessing but the last sentence in the story is telling.. "And never again did anyone see Khushiya sitting on the stone platform in front of the auto supply store."⁷ Khushiya morphs into a probable lover or aggressor from that of a pimp, all

⁷ Hasan Manto, Saadat, Matt Reeck, and Aftab Ahmad. "Khushiya." *Bombay Stories*. Gurgaon, Haryana: Random House India,

in an attempt to reconfigure and reassert his sexuality in front of Kanta- a transformation that is essentially underscored by the politics of power that hegemonizes women even in a so called subaltern realm.

Insult or Hatak can be read as a companion piece because in the same way Kanta's unintended insult posits a sense of awakening in Khushiyan, Sugandhi is confronted with the fragility and meaninglessness of her existence when she is rejected by a customer at the dead of night. There is something infinitely tragic about the entire picture of Sugandhi stranded on the road at 2am with her painted face, decked up in her best sari, only to be rewarded with an 'yuhkk' echoing in her ears. There is something more palpably insulting in this case than Khushiyan's conflict because the insult in this case is very much voluntary and intended. What makes Sugandhi's case infinitely more tragic is the way she is completely de-sexed and rejected in that single moment, when she is insulted. This act of insult has the politics of power encoded in that action as the Seth in his fancy car is in a position of power to reject her. He is the one who pays her for her services and is ergo at a position to select and reject whoever he wants. What is rendered obscene in this story is the way by which Seth ji in his fancy car so casually disregards her agency, without any concern for the implication of his action .She is nothing but a commodity for him, meant to be paraded about, one that he can choose or reject at his own free will thereby serving as a conduit to impose his gloating superiority on the oppressed 'other'. Even though the *Seth ji* comes to avail a prostitute's services, there is an unbridgeable gap between their social standing- one that cannot be, so easily cemented. However, it is here, precisely at this point where Manto the writer takes on the mantle of feminism- etching out a way by which the subaltern can answer back - by granting the subaltern subject, the agency to do so- and all of it is done by a

transformation in the subaltern subject that stems from a pressing urgency to fight back the tears and avenge the insult. Sugandhi goes through a process of internal transformation when she awakens to the true, despairing reality of her existence and in that moment of awareness; she also finds a way to become an agent of change by her own merit. Sugandhi who had always led a double life, constructing a make-belief world foregrounded by the ideals of love and maternal warmth, finding a pressing need to be validated by the men who visit her, suddenly wakes up to the glaring hollowness and decrepit nature of her existence. It is not that she was till that moment unaware of the fact that Madho, the police constable who frequented her was exploiting her while perpetuating the myth of a happy, conjugal life that someone like Sugandhi can never be entitled to. Sugandhi was well aware of the pretentious nature of their relationship but she did not have the strength to dismantle the laboriously constructed myth that she had created for herself. Even though the idyll is make-believe and thoroughly degenerate in reality, the make-believe world gives her the security of being loved and cherished by someone unconditionally- something that Sugandhi does not want to lose, however artificial in conception. But that single moment of insult changes everything. Even though right after the incident, driven by a mad, seething rage, she still craves for some sort of a validation from a man about her appearance, this attitude undergoes a marked change in the later part of the story, when she finds strength to confront the reality of her existence- goaded on by the insult. She rejects Madho 's advances, exposing the pretentious nature of all his claims and advances ,thereby reclaiming some part of her lost dignity. The woman in this story is self-respecting, not accepting an insult from anybody, and a realist who could cast away even the last comforting illusion, preferring to follow her painful, friendless path with her dog as her sole companion, rather than continue to bear with exploitation and falsehood. In many ways, her character has far more sterling qualities than many

virtuous wives.

Sugandhi can be read almost as an extension of *Khushiyan*- both having experienced some sort of a degradation that had forced them to come to some sort of an internal awakening in their consciousness in order to reclaim their individuality. Manto treats *Khushiyan* with the same respect with which he treats Sugandhi- something that further elucidates how he looked at men and women as equals- showing them capable of the same dignity and indignity as any other person.

One of the most important and visually spectacular story in the anthology is that of *Mozelle*. It is important to single out this story because this one story evokes most of Manto's concern with the time he lived in. *Mozelle* is an Anglo Indian prostitute- a free spirit who is as free as the mountain air she breathes in. This character has been given extraordinary agency in the way she is completely in control over her sexuality. She is intelligent, far-sighted, takes her own decisions, strong headed and not at all sentimental- far more sensible and practical than most of the men around her. Manto's stories sometimes merrily describe good, healthy female anatomy. His story '*Mozelle*' is full of the long legs, strong calves and full breasts of his female protagonist.

The tall, fleshy and beautiful Jewess who lives in an apartment in Bombay, is sensuous and seductive. Clad in her long robe, she wears wooden *kharons*, clasping them to her feet with her toes so awkwardly that they often make her trip and fall mostly on the male residents of the building.

A young *Sardarji*, who is her neighbour, falls deeply in love with her. She flirts with him quite fiercely, always stopping short of conceding to his beseeching that she should marry him. "You are too conventional. It won't work," she says to him.

At last he gives up on her and gets engaged to a young girl of his own community and Mozelle is happy for him, though rather wistfully.

Meanwhile, Bombay is bleeding with communal carnage and Hindu, Muslim and Sikh gangs are perpetrating massacres on the neighborhoods of one another.

One morning Mozelle finds the *Sardarji* in tears and desperate to rescue his fiancé from a building that is to be attacked. She quickly forces him to disguise himself as a Muslim, despite his religious protests and drags him to that building. Hurrying to the flat of the Sikh girl, Mozelle takes off her clothes and makes the girl wear her Jewish robe. “Run!”⁸ she tells the Sikh couple. Stark naked, she begins to descend the stairs of the building. The blood-thirsty crowd, seeing a young naked woman descending happily down the stairs is fascinated and distracted. Just then her treacherous *kharon* slips and she comes hurtling down to the ground.

She is fatally wounded.

The crowd is dumbfounded as it gazes on the dying woman, lying on the road, in her glorious nudity. Then someone tries to cover her body. With a sweep of her arm, Mozelle removes the covering sheet, whispering, “Off with it, your blasted religion!”⁹

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

Manto's female characters are strongly evocative of the grotesque degradation of humanity in general. However as critic Ben Sonnenberg points out in his article on Manto, sometimes the

⁸ Hasan Manto, Saadat, Matt Reeck, and Aftab Ahmad. "Mozel." *Bombay Stories*. Gurgaon, Haryana: Random House India, 2014.. Print

⁹ Hasan Manto, Saadat, Matt Reeck, and Aftab Ahmad. "Mozel." *Bombay Stories*. Gurgaon, Haryana: Random House India, 2014.. Print

darkness surrounding these characters seems too unrelieved. "One can't help but equate such repetitive characterizations with a narrowness of vision." As Sonnenberg points out," his emphasis on the disfigurement of women's spirits and bodies is rarely relieved by a portrait of a woman of whole character, with independent emotions and an undamaged mind. In story after story, Manto links their fate to sexual vulnerability: his women suffer sexual humiliation, seduction, domination, rape, pregnancy, abandonment, prostitution, murder. They are almost always victims, with the power only to occasion their own destruction." We do not really come across women fighting back or rebelling against the atrocities meted out to them.

I do not agree with this criticism. You have a character like Mozelle for every Janaki who is a more passive depiction. Mozelle is strong and independent- in full control of her actions. She can see through the hypocrisy of the society and till her last breath, she stands true to what she believes in by rejecting the farce of communal violence altogether which only existed to legitimize mankind's worst impulses. By projecting her body on the rioters as a spectacle, she also achieves singular distinction as someone who rises to the occasion in all her glory to redeem the sins of others. In a way, she is self-sacrificing, unapologetically so; a sacrifice that is more driven by will, rather than what the society expects from women.

Manto's fiction was also considered 'obscene' because he chose to write mostly about the urban prostitutes. Though prostitution was openly admissible round that time, people avoided talking about them for fear of granting them any social recognition whatsoever.

In *Black Trousers* or "*kaali salwar*" which is regarded as his most poignant tale of prostitution, Manto evokes with stunning precision, the physical surroundings, the listless, lonely days and desperate imaginings of a prostitute whose business is failing. In abject poverty, Sultana seems to be more obsessed about acquiring a pair of new black trousers for the religious occasion of Muharram, than other basic necessities. A recurrent theme in many of Manto's narratives was the unremitting association of prostitution with religion. As he himself pointed out *kothas* (whorehouses) were places, where men prostituted their mistresses and temples the place where people prostituted their Gods. This might sound obscene to most people but for someone like Manto, who believed himself to be above the religious divide, nothing could justify the atrocities of war. Embittered by the acute monstrosity of the partition, Manto chose to be deliberately 'obscene' to drive home the grating obscenity of the partition. It did not matter to him which religion or which country people tried to glorify by killing and violating innocent people who had no personal association with them. He did not care about which community they belonged to. For him they were only base murderers, irrespective of whatever caused them to manifest such savagery. Nothing could justify killing in his eyes. He regarded people only on a 'human level' and to what extent were they able to tame their inner monsters.

"*Bu*" or "Odor" was another such tale which was charged with obscenity. Ismat Chughtai, another woman writer during the partition who was also a personal friend of Manto's was charged alongside him for 'obscenity' for her short story "*lihaaf*". They were both tried on the same day in the court of Lahore. Chughtai later recounts the event in her autobiographical narrative "*In the name of those married women*". She writes:

" 'Bu' was taken up first.

'Is this story obscene?'

Manto's lawyer asked. 'yes' answered the witness.

'Can you put your finger on a word which is obscene?' \Witness: ' The word 'chest'.'

Lawyer: 'My lord, the word chest is not obscene.'

Witness: "No But here the writer means a woman's breasts.'

Manto was on his feet instantly and blurted out: " A women's chest must be called breasts and not groundnuts."¹⁰

The court reverberated with loud guffaws. Manto also began to laugh." Manto's tongue in cheek humour and apparent frivolity asserts the fact that he was clearly not repentant in any way about his choice of words.

As Partha Chatterjee formulates, colonized nations suffer a period of hysteria post Independence. An adherence to European Modernity and at the same time, a resistant reaction to it creates a sort of ambivalence and disturbance. To counter this and to assert its own "sovereignty and spiritual superiority", India presented to the world- its sword and shield- the New (postcolonial) writing in English and the New (Modern) woman- a bloody haunted and scarred literature in the language of the colonizer that would strike back and the pure chaste, goddess like figure of the Native woman who would protect and nourish. Writers sketched out the figure of the New Indian woman and forced her into existence. Manto refused to do so. Rejecting the language of the colonizer and the ordered form of the short story, Manto delved into the cacophony of his own language to talk of his own dirty society in which women remained unchaste, impure and real. Manto's works rejects the concepts of building an ideal nation, they reject the idea of 'writing back', they reject the notion of burdening the woman with the duty of saving the Nation's face.

¹⁰ Shukla, Vandana. 'Owned by the Disowned', *The Tribune*, May14, 2012.

Manto's stories are about the distorted, crumpled, corrupt self. He writes not to strike back, neither to protect or nourish. Manto is that 'native man of culture' who writes not to fight any national problem but to fight for the 'human' in everyone. He strives not for the freedom of the nation but for the freedom of the souls of the people.

Thus Manto's women reject the traditional mould and cultural elitism of the courtesan prototype; the *tawaif* in Ruswa's *Umrao Jaan Ada*, Bankim Chandra's ascetic warrior women in *Anandamaath*, and also the vulnerable domesticity of the wife-mother in Premchand, Renu and other writers. His women live unapologetic lives, negotiating patriarchy, the burden of colonialism and the subsequent marginality without compromising on some core values that they hold dear. In the same way Manto's men are not one dimensional caricatures, slipping into predictable moulds of heroes and villains but a bundle of contradictions, weighed down by their ethical ambiguities, shaking the readers out of their stupor. Manto compels us to recognize the subaltern space as very much relevant and integral to our own lives.

