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VOICES FROM BLACK MARGINS IN SAADAT HASAN MANTO'S SELECT SHORT STORIES: A HUMANISTIC PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Saadat Hasan Manto belonged to the Progressive Writers Movement that began in late twenties and early thirties. The movement sought social equality and social justice, condemning social injustices and prejudices. A close examination of Manto's writing introduces us with humanistic approach that he adopted towards the plight of deprived and despised section of Indian society. Among other character she portrays prostitutes as human beings with weaknesses and virtues. He reveals how they suffer in the closed and cluttered world of brothels, although they possess essential goodness of heart and head. He recognizes the existence of prostitutes as part and product of society. He not only reveals their miserable life but also exposes the duplicitous face of respectable society. He tries to put female sex workers on equal footing with the women of respectable society. Like a respectable woman, they want to settle in life through marriage and want to be loved and respected. Manto subverts the view that sex workers are socially irresponsible, emotionally stoic, sexually unfaithful and irreligious. In the beginning, they are incapable of managing lives on their own; rather they let men exploit them but with the passage of time they emerge assertive and independent, refusing to be exploited. Manto endows them with the virtues of compassion, love, trust and sacrifice. He brings forth the view that they are as human as the women of respectable society are.

Key Words: Sex workers, Pimps, Brothel, Mainstream, Duplicitous Segregation, Goodness

Saadat Hasan Manto, belonged to the Progressive Writers' Movement that began in 1932 with the publication of *Angaarey (Embers)*—a collection of nine short stories and a play— by Sajjad Zaheer, Ahmed Ali, Mahmuduzzafar and Rashid Jahan. The movement sought social equality and social justice, condemning social injustice and prejudices. The writers advocated social equality, liberty and fraternity along the lines of the French Revolution. They were against any kind of oppression whether it was in the form of British Rule or oppressive practices and prejudices in India. They sought the end of social injustice through socialistic

mode of economy. But Manto is different from other writers associated with the movement in the way he looked at the social ills. He did not suggest any ready remedies to cure the social ills.

A close examination of Manto's writing introduces us with humanistic approach that he adopted towards the plight of down-trodden and despised section. He selects the characters for his writing from the lower section of Indian society. He was committed to the truth which is manifest in his writings and interviews though he is considered as "a prince of pornographers" (Sadiq 305) for choosing sex workers as protagonists of his stories. In his

interview with BBC, Manto remarks, "If you find my stories dirty, the society you are living in dirty...I expose only the truth" (BBC Hindi.com website). Manto shocked the moralists by frankly exploring the themes of sex outside wedlock, objectification of women and sexual violence. He kept the view that "literature is the pulse of community" and it gives "news about the nation, the community to which it belongs, its health, its illness" (Bhalla 72). As a writer of human concerns, Manto faithfully recorded in his writing whatever he surveyed in his surroundings.

The present paper seeks to examine the image of female sex workers as revealed by Manto in his stories such as "Insult" (Hatak)," "The Black Shalwar," "Sharda," and "License" Manto reveals the true image of sex-workers, debunking the negative and stereotype image of prostitutes as created in the main stream life and literature. He critically examines their life and portrays them as human beings with weaknesses and virtues. "He did not beautify what was ugly nor hide what he felt should be exposed" (Hasan). He reveals how they suffer in the closed and cluttered world of brothels, although they possess essential goodness. Socially, they are despised and segregated, economically they are exploited, sexually, they are debauched.

Manto looks at sex as an integral part of human existence, and no part of human existence, for him, is despicable and taboo. He brings out the subversive sexual slavery of the women through the characters of prostitutes but the way he treats the tabooed subject shocks the moralists. Even the charge of obscenity, legal harassment and mental torture for the same fail to stop him from writing the social reality. Manto remarks, "If you cannot tolerate these stories it means this world is intolerable. The ills which I have, are the ills of this system" (*Dastawez* 4:27). Manto further remarks, "If any mention of a prostitute is obscene then her existence too is obscene. If any mention of her is prohibited, then her profession too should be prohibited" ("SafedJhooth" 50). He defends his choice of subject matter, "We can talk about barbers, washer men, vegetable sellers and innkeepers. We can tell tales about thieves, petty

criminals, dupe...why can't we think of the prostitute?" ("SafedJhooth" 50).

Manto, in a way, substantiates the view that brothels were invented by man for his enjoyment. Therefore, he seems to hold man responsible for the perpetuation of flesh trade. Man visits prostitutes to satiate his lust, loses interest and discards them as destitute when they lose physical charms. He reveals how they are excluded from the mainstream society. The Municipal Committee designs their houses differently from that of the respectable society. Their houses are designed in such a way that "they do not establish themselves all over the town" (Manto 2001: 60). In the name of social health and sanctity, they are not only segregated from the mainstream society but also forced to live in dark dwellings with shabby and stinking toilets. The filthy living conditions put hazardous impact on their physical as well as mental health.

Manto recognizes the existence of prostitutes as part and product of society as he keeps the view that "the house of a prostitute is like a dead body which society carries on its shoulders. This dead body may be highly decomposed, stinking, terrifying and frightening but it is related to the society and there is no harm in looking at its face" ("SafedJhooth" 50). Manto's use of the life of prostitutes as central concern of his stories not only reveals their miserable life but also exposes the duplicitous face of respectable society. He tries to put female sex workers on equal footing with the women of respectable society. Like a respectable woman, they want to love and be loved but find every man pretender and liar which is reflected in the words of Saugandhi: "Love, what a beautiful word, she would think. Oh, if only one could rub like a balm into one's body!" (Manto 2001: 87).

Manto reveals the bitter truth that most of the women in his stories are forced into the flesh trade by their dear and near ones like husbands, lovers and male relatives. In "Insult," **Saugandhi adopts** prostitution to seek love. Sultana in "The Black Shalwar," is emotionally blackmailed by her casual lover KhudaBakhsh, a lorry driver, to meet his needs. In "Sharda," Sharda submits to the false love of the pimp, Kareem who turns her into a prostitute.

In "Ten Rupee Note," Sarita is prostituted by her own mother on account of financial constraints. In "License," Niyati, a widow, wants to earn bread as tongo driver but the municipal office does not issue her driving licence. Left with no option to burn the hearth, she takes up prostitution as profession as she is given a licence to sell her body.

Manto's female protagonists suffer from emotional weakness that also contributes to their pathetic plight. In the beginning, they give in to the false promises of financial security as given by pimps and agents, and sugar-coated words of clients and customers. Their situation is summed up in the words of Saugandhi "Every night the customer, new or old, would declare his love for her. Although she knows full well he is lying, she melts like wax and really believe it" (Manto 2001: 4). As naïve girls, they fail to anticipate the danger involved in the commercial activity they undertake. Though, at times, they realize that they are being duped, they continue in the profession, finding no escape route. Their situation is summed up in Saugandhi's reply to her neighbor Tamancha Jaan, "This laif? Very bad...that you couldn't even earn enough for your food" (Manto 2001: 57). It is clear that their nativity and emotional weakness force them to remain in the ditty and despicable world of brothels.

Manto gives a detail of the frightening experiences of prostitutes in the closed and cruel world of brothels. They are considered as bodies sans soul and mind. Manto foregrounds the duplicity of social system in the way males enjoy their bodies in the private and despise them in the public. The mal-treatment meted out to them is reflected in the condition of Sultana who is so much roughed up at night that she suffers from a severe backache. When she goes to toilet in the morning, she finds it rather difficult to stand on her own without the support of the flush chain. "But no sooner had she taken hold of the chain to get up; there was a clanking sound above and all of a sudden water gushed out with such a rush that she shrieked out of fright" (Manto 2001: 59). In "A Hundred Candle Power Bulb" the pimp uses the relentless light of a strong bulb to prevent a prostitute from sleeping. In "Insult," Saugandhi's grueling session with clients "left her

bones cracking and her body aching all over" (Manto 2001: 82).

Manto depicts how women are prostituted by the brothel keepers, clients, pimps and police. Both their body and earning remain under the tight control of brothel keepers. When they are reluctant to offer their bodies to clients, they suffer in two ways, the first they lose the prospects of earning their living, the second, they have to face the ire of brothel keepers. Though they are owners of their bodies, the price is fixed by the buyers. They are forced to cater to the needs of the clients but, in turn, the clients do not hold themselves responsible towards them. Relationship between prostitutes and clients is like the relationship between master and slave, not based on equalitarian norms as expected in a commercial activity.

It is often assumed that prostitutes enjoy sexual freedom but in reality they are sex slaves. They are forced to cater to the degraded tastes of their clients. Their livelihood depends on the satisfaction of clients. So they think it their responsibility to satisfy male needs in order to survive in the trade. But, on the other hand, responsibility is not expected from the customers. In the outer world, they are not accepted as respectable beings. If they wish to work, they are not considered in the category of social workers. They are forced to live in the flesh trade to eke out their livelihood. Their social exclusion leads to "the exclusion from educational opportunities, leading to unequal education" (Barry 20). Apart from economic and sexual exploitation, they undergo mental trauma throughout their life.

Manto subverts the view that sex workers are socially irresponsible, emotionally stoic, sexually unfaithful and irreligious. It is taken for granted that they are averse to human or social relations and institutions but the reality what Manto reveals is that they regard intimate social relations in the way the women of the so-called respectable society do. Saugandhi in "Insult" forges lasting relationships with every man who visits her. "She had all the qualities that a man considered essential in a woman" (Manto 2001: 96). She provides the widow neighbour with emotional support and promises of financial support. Similarly, Sultana in

"The Black Shalwar" believes in fraternity which gets reflected in her relationships with clients, colleagues and cohorts. She gives money to the jobless KhudaBakhsh to start his business in photography. In "Sharda," Sharda risks her own life while protecting her sister from the clutches of a pimp. Besides, she helps her pimp in the times of financial crisis.

Prostitutes are often rejected by clients, especially when they lose their physical charms and vigour. This rejection deprives them not only of the means of livelihood but also tortures them psychologically. Moreover, they are forced to suffer alone in the isolated and dingy flats. Their condition is revealed through the version of Sultana, "No one would pay more than three rupees...God knows why, but not one of them thought her worth more than three" (Manto 2001: 58). She tries to raise the rate to meet her basic needs, but drops the idea fearing that she will lose the customers. Manto reveals the emptiness in the life of prostitutes through the plight of Sultana, "She also felt empty, like a train which having discharged its passenger is shunted into the yard and left there" (Manto 2001: 63).

Manto exposes the real face of religion through the character of Shankar in "Kali Shalwar" who takes advantage of Sultana's goodness. Religion despises prostitutes, considering them impure and fallen. Shankar though stands for Lord Shiva in Hindu mythology, behaves contrary to the image of the deity. He is supposed to be ascetic and destroyer of evil but in reality he is a man of unbridled passions and contributor to the profession of prostitution. He takes advantage of Sultana's position and enjoys free sex with her in the name of friendship. He is entirely relied on her for his carnal desires and other needs.

Prostitutes want to be part of the mainstream society through social and cultural institutions but they are not accepted. A male character in "Kali Shalwar" admits to Sultana that "neither of them will ever get married as these conventions are not made for them" (Manto 2001: 70). They are given false promises of marriage, friendship and love. Sometimes they fall in their emotional trap to be exploited in a new way. In "Insult," Saugandhi is duped by a false lover, Madho,

a policeman, who not only exploits her sexually and emotionally but also extorts money from her in the name of marriage. Sometimes, overwhelmed with emotions she begins to behave with clients as if she were a mother or loving wife. The way she behaves with her clients suggests that she yearns to be a good wife or mother. In "Ten Rupees," Sarita, a fifteen-year-old girl, lives with her mother in a chawl. She wishes to marry her to a "respectable man." In "License," Niyati, widow of a Tonga driver is very kind to her baby girl. Even in brothel, she keeps her close to the heart. Manto shows how they yearn to settle in life but are not accepted as daughters, wives, mothers and home-makers.

It is often taken for granted that prostitutes do not have nothing with the outer world but the fact that they crave for life outside the closed world of brothels. They wish to go back to the social life but they are forbidden on account of one or another reason. Sultana in "Kali Shalwar" yearns to celebrate the festival of Muharram going outside the closed world. It is reflected in her ardent desire for Kali Salwar to be worn at the time of Muharram. The festival of Muharram is fast approaching but Sultana does not have money enough to buy a black shalwar while other women have fine clothes. Sultana "was saddened that she couldn't afford such clothes for Muharram" (Manto 2001: 64). This not only shows her religious fervor but also reveals her desire as human being to be a part of the mainstream society.

Though Manto's women undergo physical and mental torture, they gain inner strength to unshackle themselves from the despicable world of prostitution. Sultana in "the Black Shalwar" chases away the man with whom she is in relationship. She gathers courage and refuses to be exploited any more. In this way, her character is more powerful than that of many virtuous wives. Saugandhi in "Insult" challenges Madho, "Why the hell did you come here?...Scoundrel, rogue? Trying to boss me around? Am I your slave?" (Manto 2001: 103).

In "Insult" Saugandhi emerges as a self-aware woman who gets determined to put an end to exploitation and live her own life. Rejected by the Seth she thinks, "This is what you came for, didn't you? Take it without paying the price but what I am, whatever is hidden inside me, neither you nor your

father can take that" (Manto 2001: 98). In Sharda, the protagonist emerges to be a strong woman who takes independent decisions. Indubitably, Sharda is Manto's literary apparatus to restate his humanistic design. 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" (Manzoor 313)

The foregoing discussion reveals though Manto's women are from various social, cultural and religious backgrounds, their predicament is almost same. Contrary to the conventional view, they possess essential goodness of heart and head. At times, they seem to be in utter despair, but they gain inner strength and reject the world prostitution. In the beginning, they are incapable of managing lives on their own; rather they let men exploit them but with the passage of time they emerge assertive and independent, refusing to be exploited by pimps and clients. Manto endows them with finer virtues of compassion, love, trust, sacrifice and friendship. He brings forth the view that they are as human as the women of respectable society are.

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