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Feministic Concerns through Fleshy Designs: A Revisit to Saadat Hasan Manto's Short Stories

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Saadat Hasan Manto has remained the most controversial writer in the Indian sub-continent whose writings send the chilling down the bones of his readers belonging to all classes. Born in 1912 in a small town Samrala near Ludhiana in Punjab, Manto very early in his life with his writings announced before the world that he was going to be the most acknowledged writer across both sides of the border and that he should be taken seriously. He had an uncanny knack for exposing the corrupt soul of the so-called civilized people of his time and he did this with his frank and honest portrayal of oppressed, pitiable, weak and victimized people in his stories. Although he started writing stories for movies in Bombay yet he had to leave India for Pakistan in 1948, one year after the partition, on communal lines, and this historic as well as horrific incident to which he remained a firsthand witness had a never forgetting imprint on his delicate mind. He repeatedly and vehemently presented in his works the horrific details of bloodshed, loot, rapes and molestation that happened during partition when a sea of humanity was displaced and had to migrate to the safer and more secure environs of the people belonging to them on religious lineage. The violence that he depicted in his writings unmasks the true face of demonized people wearing many faces. Almost one million men, women and children were butchered during the massacre of 'ethnic cleansing', a phrase which reminds us of Hitler's perpetration of the most untenable and horrific crimes on 'Jews' for racial supremacy. As it happens during war or riots, this time also women were at the receiving end in bearing the most horrific crimes committed on them by the frenzied bigots.

Manto a born rebel never gave a heed to the norms of the society; he chose his own path to tread on at times accused of being a communal by his detractors but he took it upon himself to reveal the interiors of those sitting at the margins in the social hierarchy—menial workers, whores, wagers, pimps, brutes and alcoholics who always remain unsung in a hollowed society where all had equal contribution in the dance of nakedness. Vandana Shukla remarks about Manto: "...he continued to unmask the world by never allowing his pen to be obscured by the convenience of compromise." (Vandana Shukla, *The Tribune*.) He wrote about the private conflicts faced by men and women due to their sexual frustrations and 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, and became a male crusader spearheading the movement addressing the issues concerning the rightful place and dignified survival of woman in society in his times. Manto was a completely misunderstood personality in his life and to a certain extent remained so even after his

death; he was regarded as a voyeur or a narcissist having keen interest in the contours of female form. But of late this viewpoint about one him has gone for a complete change. Now he is hailed as one of the greatest votaries of freedom of speech and expression whose tireless spirit eschewed the cause of womanhood in its true sense. To an immature, average reader Manto appears a sensualist dealing in obscenity and vulgarity; to a sensitive mind endowed with all those human sensibilities and the finest qualities of heart and head, this agitated, untamed but humane spirit is found to have a great insight into human psychology and behaviour, particularly of women, and is involved in a ceaseless struggle with the forces which dehumanize the fragile psyche of the feminine world, refusing to toe the line of irrational, hollowed and hypocritical ways of this so-called civilized gentry. Ayesha Jalal very pointedly underlines the pained inner self of Manto and his sensitive self: “The protagonists of his stories are ordinary people who are left to cope with the monumental tragedy of millions of families being torn asunder, losing their homes and their lives. In the middle of loot, rapes and killings, Manto shows us the small rays of humanity.” (Ayesha Jalal, *The Hindu*)

Manto the writer of masterpiece ‘Toba Tek Singh’ in his short stories describes how the humanity, the peace loving, god-fearing people suffer most on account of the communal hatred spread all across the world and depicts the scenes of untold miseries faced by the helpless people where the communal bigots and fanatics have become law unto themselves, perpetuating the mayhem of slaughtering people on the basis of communal identity, irrespective of sex or age. The controversial writer despite being accused of obscenity, debauchery and drinking was very insightful at heart and he felt the pangs of separation amidst the prevailing atmosphere of mistrust and hypocrisy. As the writer himself was compelled by the stifling environment of his time to leave the place he belonged to, it was his benevolent spirit that understood and felt the pain in the eyes of the men and women who were disrobed of their honour and dignity, and tried to give voice to the throttled feelings and longings of his characters, particularly women.

Manto’s stories are replete with flesh, lust and explicit sex; he delineates his characters, predominantly females, keeping in view on the one hand the demands of body and soul while on the other social norms and morality of the time, and he weaves a pattern and the thread runs through the two warring and opposite camps of humanity on the basis of religion—Hindu and Muslim. To an immature, raw reader Manto appears a voyeuristic who takes delight in undressing the modesty of women by presenting them as tools of pleasure. In his stories ‘Cold Flesh’, ‘Untie it’, ‘The Naked Voice’, and ‘For God’s Sake’ one finds enough stuff on the verge of obscenity so far as the depiction of women is concerned and this raised the eyebrows of many people, even the state establishment and he was accused of catering sex to his readers, and consequently had to face charges in the court. He was also denounced as a literary snob who boasted about his literary acumen; the lines inscribed on his tomb say: “Here lies buried Saadat Hasan Manto in whose bosom are enshrined all the secrets and art of short story writing. Buried under mounds of earth, even now he is contemplating whether he is a greater short story writer or God.”(Naila Inayat, *Viewpoint Online Issue*) At another time he claimed himself as one of the greatest short story writers of both India and Pakistan.

His detailed description not only of the contours of body but also of the internal feelings and longings of his characters makes him a very popular writer. But a commoner takes delight only in the basest things associated with the sexual innuendo, and the people of his time were highly critical of this open display of sex and vulgarity and he was often misunderstood and derided by the so-called civil society. Manto removing the façade worn by the society of his times remarked about his writings: “If you find my stories dirty, the society you live in is dirty. With my stories, I only expose the truth.” (Rakesh Kumar, The Express Tribune). Manto was a genius and a great psychologist who understood what was happening in the heart of his characters, what was passing through their minds. Manto always has his hand at the pulse of his characters who are juxtaposed in various life situations, battling with the ills of society of their time. But a serious student of Manto finds him a crusader against all sorts of abuse faced by women on account of man-made barriers resulting in discrimination on the basis of caste, and community where they, as it happens during violence and bloodshed, suffer the most. And the writer has a penetrating eye to see and feel the unfulfilled longings, anguish and pain of his female characters that have no identity of their own except the community they belong to. For all their sufferings and torture—physical and emotional—the women of Manto find themselves in a state of mess as the question who are responsible for all the bestiality and brutality on them baffles us. Through his stories he voices his concerns for the awful plight of women and like a true feminist he forcefully though indirectly pleads for the honour and self-esteem of his battered and bruised women characters. He also tries to solve the puzzle as what governs the man-woman relationship, within the safe precincts of society and outside it.

Manto’s story ‘Cold Flesh’ describes how after partition in 1948 the women had to suffer during communal violence as their sexual violation by the goons of the one community or the other was the order of the day. Ishwar Singh the main character and one of the rioters is obsessed with as what happened to him when he was to assault a young woman sexually realizing that the girl was dead, a cold flesh. Though he was well-built and robust, yet this particular incident reduced him impotent and a lifeless figure, and the sight of the dead girl nags his conscience constantly. This story is a pointed and subtle satire on the fate of women when the writer remarks that the Muslim girl is saved from being molested because she is dead. Women have no separate existence; they are for the comforts of men: Ishwar’s wife Kulwant Kaur is enraged at the transgression of her husband as she can’t think of her husband having escapades with other women. The author observes that women have to offer themselves as playthings to men till they are alive; being the soft targets, they can escape from this torture only after death. The humiliation and helplessness of women here finds a powerful expression in the voice of Manto who ironically was accused of obscenity for writing this story.

In ‘An Anguished Certitude’ we see the separation of mother and daughter in violence after the partition where an aged mother while searching for her missing daughter is on the verge of insanity. But she is sure of re-union with her daughter and the fulfillment of this mirage, it seems, will give the meaning to her life. She comes across the author many times during the course of the story but every time she appears all tatters and feeble but more determined of meeting her daughter. That’s why she refuses to buy the argument

from the author that during the turmoil and bloodshed her daughter might have been killed. She says firmly, rather cutting the humanity to size: “She is very beautiful, so beautiful that no one can kill her. Even no one can slap her.” (Saadat Hasan Manto, Manto’s Beautiful Short Stories, p.45) This comment reveals not only the dark truth related with war time crimes on women but also smears the black on the face of the so-called civilized society. Manto gives a painstaking expression to the feelings of this aged woman when she sees her daughter with a young Sikh boy but her daughter asks her companion to ‘move fast’. We hear a lacerating cry from the mother for her daughter “Bhagbhari”, a cry that remains unanswered. The heartbroken lady’s search comes to an end when she is convinced that her daughter has died and with this she collapses in the Farid Chowk of Amritsar. A mother’s craving and search for her daughter who probably might have been forced to marry a Sikh boy raises the emotional tempo in the heart of the readers, reminding us of the danger to the human relations caused by communal frenzy. The writer firmly believes that it is the womanhood which suffers the most during violence as they become the sole target of venting out their fury. Besides, by portraying inconsolable mother Manto analyses maternal feelings and cravings, and tries to see the world through their eyes, a zone a few male writers of his time could venture into.

‘The Naked Voice’ another typical Manto-story veers around the issue of sexual frustrations and social inhibitions where the conflict between individual’s private carnal desires on the one hand and public honour on the other shatter the individual mentally. Gama the younger of the two brothers was reluctant for marriage earlier but his suppressed desires for the company of woman are aroused in summer when all married couples start sleeping upstairs on the same roof where the narrow curtains just protect the privacy. The sounds of love-making coming from different directions in the still night disturb the lonely and sex-deprived Gama who while lying down on his cot can’t catch sleep for a single moment, just thinking about the developments taking place around himself, consequently resulting in change in his earlier stance of not getting married. Feeling the stress of sexual urge he finally requests his brother Bholu and sister-in-law to find a bride for him. It seems that he does not need a companion but a woman to satisfy his animal instincts and marriage in this regard is the only way out. But after his marriage he fails to consummate it because he just keeps on thinking about the people sleeping around him and their presence leaves him numbed towards his wife. Mentally he passes through a torrid period as now his opinion about the marital bliss and pleasure associated with it stands changed. Under duress, his repeated efforts to sleep with his wife and develop physical relations prove futile resulting in the breaking of relationship. When the word spreads about as why Gama’s wife has left him, the latter becomes violent, loses his sanity and tears down all the make-shift curtains on the roof. Manto’s ‘The Naked Voice’ is a psycho-sexual story which shows the inner conflicts faced by Gama on account of sexual frigidity and lack of virility. Women are for the sake of men, to provide cozy surroundings to their men-folk; they have no say in fulfilling their own longings and repressed desires. Manto further asserts that an individual devoid of healthy sexual life develops morbidity and becomes a torn, psychic personality.

Like ‘An Anguished Certitude’, ‘Open It’ also revolves around the search for a daughter but this time by a father. Sarajuddin asks everyone for help in tracing his daughter Sakina

but he is not aware that in every heart there sits a devil. The young people whom he asked for help though are able to trace Sarajuddin's daughter but to the utter dismay of humanity Sakina was violated by her own men, people belonging to her own religion. Manto time and again affirms that behind every civilized face there lurks a monster, ready to pounce upon anybody, even on its master. That's why Sakina was assaulted by the very people who were expected to be her rescuers, supporting the point held by Graham Green that betrayal is in human blood and one betrays the moment one finds the opportunity. In hospital Sakina's action of untying the cord of her lower (salwar, an ethnic garment worn by woman) when the doctor asks Sarajuddin to 'open the window' is a very touching scene and presents a very pitiable and pathetic state of womanhood, because she does so thinking that instead of the doctor's order some brute has ordered to do so with the purpose of defiling her again. This tells us what would have happened with her; she might have been subjugated to these inhuman acts earlier so even at the subconscious level Sakina readily surrenders herself without any protest, even not bothering to know that it was her own father standing beside her bed. For Manto this appalling state of woman is repulsive as she has to bear the unspeakable not only on her body but also on her psyche, the scars of which she can never get rid of.

'For Honour's Sake', 'Deal of Loss' and 'Sharifan' are further extensions of crimes on women on communal lines. In these stories the girls belonging to the rival community are provided to the offenders but these crooks become disturbed and shameful when the truth dawns upon them that these abused girls come from their own community. What an irony—the very shameless people who are devoid of any strand of compassion and rationality in their misdeeds become ashamed of what they did to the hapless girls. In 'For Honour's Sake' Chunni Lal used to provide facilities to Harbans, a Hindu son of an officer in the city, for abusing Muslim girls brought from the pimps so that he can promote his own interests by developing proximity with an officer's son. But one day Chunni Lal's world collapses when he finds that the girl Harbans has abused was none but his own sister Rupa, who cries 'brother' when she sees Chunni Lal. Though furious at what he saw, Chunni Lal didn't reveal anything to Harbans about Rupa but Harbans was able to sense that there was something wrong with Chunni Lal so far as the abused girl was concerned and sensing danger to his life from Chunni Lal, he silenced the voice of the latter with his own pistol. And the next day there was news in the newspaper to save Harbans that Chunni Lal committed suicide after raping his sister.

'Deal of Loss' also raises the question of molestation of women on religious basis. In 'Sharifan' the rape and murder of Sharifan and Bimla speak of the horrifying crimes against women on the basis of communal bigotry and the fate meted out to these two victims have symbolic implications so far as the plight of the woman is concerned. W.H.Auden in his poem September 1, 1939 philosophically says about the prevailing mistrust in his time:

Those to whom evil is done
Do evil in return. (W.H. Auden, Another Time)

And these two lines remind us of the time when Manto unburdened his feelings in his stories. Men, Manto concurs, by assaulting women of rival community prove their

superiority and avenge the wrongs done to them by the people of another community but the ultimate sufferers remain the women on both sides; it is they who lose their pride and honour; they are used as tools for one-up-man-ship. Ayesha Jalal tells about Manto: "He wrote passionately about the inconsolable humiliation and brutalization of women by men of rival communities in Punjab. Which religion sanctioned such abominations? Who was responsible for the killing of hundreds of thousands of innocent people?" (Ayesha Jalal, *The Hindu*) No one cares about their feelings, that they are also human beings like men, that they have their own imagined beautiful world, harbouring sweet dreams to come true. During wars, the women always become the soft targets for inflicting pain and humiliation on the other party because the ugly face of violence doesn't see beyond the innocent eyes.

Manto's 'Stench' also revolves around man's craving for the satisfaction of his fleshy desires. Man becomes blind in his lust for woman; he forgets about social status and dignity for seeking the company of cozy arms of the woman and even can bed the filthiest and the most unattractive woman if an opportunity comes. Randhir in the story develops infatuation for a sullied, poor girl and sleeps with her with the intention of taking a revenge on a Christian girl Hazel. He even compares the two types of girls—educated, good-looking and stylish and illiterate, poor and unkempt—and becomes more passionate about the poor girl. No other girl could strike a chord in his heart and fascinate him as much as this poverty-stricken girl. This reminds us of Balwant Gargi's autobiographical novel *The Naked Triangle* where the protagonist despite having a very beautiful, educated and cultured wife finds comfort in the arms of his housemaid in wee hours while his wife is sleeping inside. Manto here makes the point that man is a drifter so far as his relationships with women are concerned; he has perversions ingrained in him and this makes him go after women after women, at times multi-tasking, and here in his deep recesses of his mind he remains obsessed with the image of woman as a pleasure tool. He doesn't care a fig about where she comes from, who she is and what her family background is.

Woman by nature is very sensitive and very emotional and these feminine characteristics are quite instrumental in establishing the kind of relationship she will have with her counterpart-man, thus making her vulnerable to the guiles of wily man. As an emotional person is swayed in her decisions by the call of her heart, she remains blinded to the reality and fails to see through the mask worn by man, ultimately resulting in her miseries. She always craves for love, for soft touches; she wants safety and security provided by her man meaning that she wants everything complete and no sharing and in return she surrenders herself completely to the individual she loves. But Arthur Miller in his play *A View from the Bridge* makes it clear through his character Alfieri that it is not possible to have everything complete: "Most of the time now we settle for the half and I like it better...it is better to settle for half..." (Arthur Miller, *A View from the Bridge*, p. 439) But as told earlier, man is a wanderer by nature; he hobnobs with many people at one time or with one person for the transitory period, thus exploiting woman emotionally and physically. Man's maneuverings Manto believes are the main cause of the sufferings of woman and this the writer has tried to present not only by giving ample space to his female characters but also by showing how they metamorphose into a new being during

the development of story. His autobiographical piece 'Janki' portrays the picture of a woman passing through various phases in her relationships with men, from the man with whom she was in love to the men for whom she develops liking in her ambitious journey to become an actress and ends up in sleeping with them. Her physical and mental agony finds expression in her decision to terminate her unlawful pregnancy for advancing her career.

'These Men: These Women' is a psychological masterpiece by Manto in which the author unravels the mystery as what are the points which affect the thought processes of male and female towards one another, subsequently determining the course of their ensuing relationship. What are the things one searches for in others and vice-versa thus becoming the crux of their future course of actions and responses has been hinted upon in a very subtle manner by the writer because at first hand he doesn't seem to be taking sides; he seems brutal, often accused of fiddling with pornography but this he does with the intent to remove the veneer of so-called civilized society in its attitude towards women at large. Said's constant fascination about Rajo and later on Faria, an Anglo-Indian nurse have left him puzzled and confused and he oscillates between soul and body, hope and fear, passions and name. But while doing so he only thinks about himself, the fulfillment of his longings; he doesn't worry about how to provide solace and safety, comfort and care and love and liberty to Rajo and Faria. Rajo was subjugated to bear the abuse inflicted upon her body and soul by her masters, four brothers; she had no recognition of her own but to cater to the demands of her masters and this continued exploitation started telling on her body resulting in loss of her charms and skin. She also craved for love, for affection and a sense of belongingness; she wanted to be respected, respect for her otherness, her liberal self. But instead of all this, she got her fingers burnt by trusting her masters, masters of her body, and made her Panchalli of modern-day Mahabharata.

Said who earlier had aversion for her and was a witness to all this torture of Rajo was moved when he saw standing her outside the house of her masters in a chilly rainy night and became obsessed with her, and started pining for her. When Rajo helps him by replacing the wet cloth on his forehead during fever, Said starts talking to himself in a disturbed manner:

Rajo, forgive me. Forgive me, Rajo,...I don't know what I am saying and what I am doing? Only, I know one thing very well that I am madly in love with you...I love you because you are suitable for hatred. You are not a woman, but a complete house. A big building, but I love your all rooms. Because they are dirty, all crumbling...I am in love with you. Isn't it strange? (Manto, 255)

Said empathizes with Rajo for her sufferings, and a spark of love is ignited in his heart. Then his painful outburst about what he saw in the rainy night in the form of a monologue characterizes Manto's own attitude towards womanhood and his love for her rightful place:

You are a brute! Not human, but demon. If admitted that she is also a

demon like you, still she is a woman and if a woman cuts into pieces, still she will be a woman, but you will not understand these things. You don't understand the difference between a buffalo and a woman, but for God's sake take her inside. Outside in the cold, her blood might have curdled. I ask, for what did you pick up quarrel with her? She is standing under the lamppost just wearing your vest and you...you...be ashamed...why don't you understand, Rajo is a woman...not a piece of pashmina, which you put on weaving machine. (Manto, 256)

Now it becomes obvious that Said is seriously in love with Rajo and the latter also comes to know that Said knows about her everything and he also loves her. Though Said in his disturbed mind once time talks about possession in love but the next moment rejects the point of one-woman-love idea and becomes infatuated with Faria, a nurse in the hospital. But a chance meeting brought them together in Lahore where Faria wants him to marry her, but Said can't come out of the state of indecision because of the fear of social backlash and second, he is still haunted by the thoughts of Rajo. Unrequited love marks the story of both Rajo and Faria; they get temporary fulfillment of their desires but ultimately their life remains a rudderless boat because man as Manto opines through his spokesperson Said doesn't know commitment and steadfastness in love.

Manto was a rebel not only in his thoughts but also actions who refused to toe the line dictated by the social norms of his times. He always stood strongly for what he felt was right in a world where decency appeared more glaring than the nakedness. Once he remarked:

I thought, man started wearing clothes when he got annoyed with his nakedness. This is the reason that when fed-up with clothes he starts running towards nudity. The reaction to courtesy is, no doubt, discourtesy. This escapism has an interesting aspect also. For brief moments man gets freedom from the suffering arising out of unabated monotony. (Manto, 304)

Many efforts were made to subdue him but in his writings he always took flight on the fanciful wings of fiery and unorthodox ideas. In a time when the crimes on women was the order of the day Manto made a niche for himself in the literary field by exploring the world of women at threadbare—their feministic concerns, their aspirations and causes of their agony, and finally gave these silent sufferers a voice which no one could throttle, a voice of a restless spirit which even till today keeps on thundering for the betterment of women even more loudly when he is no more: "Saadat Hasan will die one day, but Manto will live on." (Rakesh Kumar, The Express Tribune) During his career as a writer Manto gave wings to his creative expression, his spirit soaring high beyond the reach of this mortal world, and he kept on singing in honour of womanhood nonchalantly till he breathed his last. The psychologist in Manto who was very sensitive at heart helps him in unraveling the deeper realms of feminine sensibilities—their cravings of flesh and blood as well as longings for respect and regard in their milieu. The rebel in him expresses his angst against the objectification of women and this he does in his own inimitable style by portraying women as tools of taking revenge or sexual gratification in the hands of men.

Manto is at his feminine best when he strongly holds the opinion that a woman must be seen from her own perspective by man, which to Manto's great disappointment man has failed to do, and through his characters he makes a forceful appeal to man through his no-hold-barred stories which abound in sex and sleaze to listen to the voice of woman regarding their longings of body and soul.

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