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**“OONH...!” FALLEN WOMEN AND SOCIETY: THE PHENOMENON OF
MARGINALIZATION IN MANTO’S STORIES “INSULT” AND “MUMMY”**

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ABSTRACT

Saadat Hassan Manto, (1912-1955) is the short story writer of the twentieth century in the language of Urdu. He was a very controversial writer of his times, who faced many court trials because of his so called ‘sex oriented’ expressions. But the fact is that Manto analysed the deep feelings of common men and women and characterized them with most sincere frankness in his writings. In many of his stories, Manto depicted woman as the main character. He brought to the reader how a woman is exploited and used by men for their individual satisfaction.

In his stories Manto gives a higher status to certain values and concepts that may roughly be called his vision of life. These values and concepts include- frankness, honesty, the discrepancy between appearance and reality, the validity of sex in life, the ethics of human relations, and the ambiguous nature of reality. The humanity that shines through in his writings is a hallmark of his fictional art and his sympathy with the downtrodden living on the fringes of society is an integral part of his vision. This essay makes a critical study of the characters found in ‘Insult’ and ‘Mummy’ with the intent of showing how Manto’s stories represents marginality and the notions of morality.

Keywords: societal hypocrisy, sexual exploitation, psychological trauma, quest for identity and human dignity.

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INTRODUCTION

Saadat Hassan Manto, belongs to the literary tradition not only of Urdu fiction, but of Hindi, Punjabi and Sindhi as well. Among all Urdu fiction writers, Manto has been translated the most extensively into these languages as well as into English. He was also a film and radio script writer and journalist. In his short life he published twenty two collections of short stories, five collections of radio plays, three collections of essays, two collections of personal sketches, one novel and many scripts for films. He wrote about prostitution, religious superstition, adolescent anxiety, sex, the Partition and Bombay cinema in the thirties and forties. They were the great themes of his time. Manto, portrays various facets of womanhood in his works. In Indian society the concept of female purity is directly related to body. The more guarded a woman is about her body

the more pure she is. Those women who transgress this norm of purity are looked down upon as 'impure' and 'fallen' from the higher ideals of life. In this sense, the protagonists in Manto's above selected stories are fallen women free from any type of social control. Based in various cities of colonial India, the stories illustrates the lives of these so called fallen women. With yet touching narratives and a critical approach to cultural stereotypes, Manto explores how a male dominated society treats, the women fallen from the mainstream society of honourable ladies and gentleman. Our society does not give the fallen women any rights to complain of the violation of dignity as these are taken to be the women of easy virtues. But Manto's protagonists show that no one can take them for granted. These social reject, inturn, reject the sham morality of society in favour of a true humanity. *Insult* a story set in colonial Bombay and *Mummy*, a narrative set in Poona city describes the lives of two prostitutes and how the unquestioned fact of male sexual need and social pressure change their lives. With this as a canvas an attempt is made in this essay to show how Manto's above selected stories explore the human essence of these characters and their quest for identity and human dignity. The essay makes an attempt to see Manto beyond the narrow prism of Partition and explores his pre-partition stories.

Saugandhi of *Insult* is a moving account of the relentless subjugation and uncertainty a "fallen" woman face through her life. Saugandhi is a prostitute. After her date with an official from the city's sanitation department, the sleeping Saugandhi is awakened in the middle of the night by her pimp Ramlal, he's got a wealthy gentleman waiting for her outside. Saugandhi freshens up and puts on makeup only for the gentleman to take one look at her and respond "Oonh!" before driving off down the alley. This raw instance of rejection proves devastating for Saugandhi. She resolves to put an end to her recurring exploitation. The next day her lover, Madho visits her, a cunning man who professes love for her but actually is an extortionist who meets her for money. Saugandhi kicks him out of the house and vows not be victimized anymore. She returns to her huge empty bed, reserved for her clients and tries to sleep, hugging her dog, the only living creature from whom she can expect love and companionship. Perhaps she finds the dog more faithful than any human being.

Saugandhi is portrayed as a generous, compassionate woman. The make-believe world of love constructed by Saugandhi has within its folds Madho, who is very prominent in sustaining her dream. With a husband-like propriety over her, Madho provides nourishment to the starved Saugandhi through his regular visits, unfulfilled promises of material help and meaningless utterances. Her heart melted when he asked, "...Give up this business. I'll give you enough money for your expenses. Well, what's the rent for this *kholi*?" (88) The deceitful attitude of Madho brings both hatred and sympathy for Saugandhi in the hearts of millions of Manto's readers. He is, in fact taking advantage of her weakness and playing the drama of love with her but she is happy to live that lie since there is no possibility of living its truth anyway. The theme of the good hearted prostitute exploited both materially and emotionally by the men in her life pervade throughout the story. The story tells us that Sangandhi is intensely emotional and that at the slightest suggestion of warmth from a man, she would melt into total submission and yet remains forever hungry for love. "...when the desire to love became very intense Manto writes she felt like taking the man lying by her side into her lap and put him to sleep by patting on the back, singing lullabies" (87). This feeling of deep compassion, pity or love, by whatever term you call it, flows through the whole narrative, till Saugandhi is rejected by a mere "Oonh!" by the *seth* (gentleman)at the middle of the night. That little 'Oonh' turns everything upside-down and creates a chaos in her life. Perhaps for the first time she feels her whole existence challenged. It's not as if she has never been rejected before. But this happens to be the moment when she has to face the reality of her existence, squarely staring at her. It's at this moment of existential emergency that Saugandhi emerges into insight regarding who she really is. These moments of humiliation churn out the entire truth of her being. "When she realized that she had dabbed her cheeks with powder and rouge and put on lipstick to make herself acceptable, she was filled with shame" (93). This shame is in fact, the feeling of being an object. Being degraded by the male surveyor who spits at the object on display. The deceitful attitude of the noble bourgeoisie male is however disturbing. Manto attacks this hypocrisy with biting sarcasm. The fact that the

'seth' parked his motorcar outside the lane and Saugandhi's request to Ramlal to bring him in was rejected when Ramlal told her, "No, he won't come here, He's a gentleman. He even had qualms about parking the car outside. Change your dress and come with me to the corner of the lane. Everything will be all right" (91). This was the initial step where the society, which is the bourgeoisie noble male, marks territory by deciding what practices and people he will keep distance from. In Manto's world candidness is the cardinal virtue and hypocrisy the cardinal sin.

Having seen through the hypocrisy of man, Saugandhi resolves to put an end to her exploitation, which is a direct result of her desire to be loved by Madho like a wife. She realizes that by maintaining this type of false relationship, she is reducing herself to the position of an object. So, after going through severe mental trauma and psychic pain, she makes a 'choice', the choice of demolishing the make-believe world consciously created and maintained by her. She throws Madho out of her life along with his and the three other photo frames. The scene shifts from acute mental turmoil to turbulent physical action. Her action saves her from being reduced to an object, a thing, without any individuality and her laugh stands for the completion of her journey of self-assertion. Towards the end of the story, the metaphor of "a packed train which after discharging all its passengers stands alone under the iron shade"(104) is invoked with telling effect. This image of empty train standing in the shed after unloading all its passengers symbolizes the emptiness which Saugandhi is feeling after shedding off all her day-dreams and delusions. She stands shifted from dream to a waking state, establishing the autonomy of a woman's existence by asserting her individuality through her quest of self knowledge. In exploring the centrality of female consciousness, Manto's feminism is implicitly present. To show the difference in Manto's approach to his subject from that of his contemporaries, here's an excerpt from Ghulam Abbas short story *Anandhi*(translated as *The Women's Quarter* by Khalid Hasan). Abbas narrates respectable society's attempts to socially control the prostitutes by relocating them to an isolated area, beyond city limits, to wipe out their morally corrupting influence from respectable neighbourhoods. "This issue was debated by the council for over a month and, in the end, it was unanimously decided that the houses owned by **these women** should be acquired by the council and in return, **the women** given land well outside the city limits in an isolated area. **The women** protested strongly against this decision; some of them even refused to obey the order and were jailed and heavily fined, but in the end, they found that were helpless. There was nothing they could do except to make the best of what they were being offered" (Abbas 2000:43: bold mine). Throughout the story Abbas refers to them impersonally as 'the women' giving us no sense that these women could also have feelings and souls. There are no glimpses into the emotions, thoughts, actions or experiences of the prostitutes. They are simply 'the women'. Abbas's critical eye is the sociologist's bird's eye view of society's hypocrisy. He doesn't suffer with his characters, doesn't get under their skin, the way Manto does. "She was standing alone in the desolate bazaar. The floral sari, which she normally wore on special occasions, fluttered gently in the late hour of the night. Its rustling sound annoyed her. It resembled the "oonh" of the seth. She felt like tearing it to shreds... To offset her shame she thought, I didn't dress up just for that bastard. It's my habit to do so. Not only me, everyone liked to dress up. But, but, at two in the morning? And Ramlal, the pimp, and the bazaar, the car, the flashlight... As she remembered all this, spots of light began to float before her eyes, she could hear the snarl of the engine with every gust of wind" (93). When Manto writes about Saugandhi, He becomes one with the soul of Saugandhi. He's not just writing about Saugandhi. He is Saugandhi. You can see her squinting in the light, hear the seth's insulting 'oonh' in the rustle of her sari, and taste her humiliated pride as she tries to make sense of why she has been left standing alone in the silent marketplace in the middle of the night. Saugandhi's dignity grows to gigantic proportions in the space of those few sentences as the reader, Manto and she merge in the silence of the dark night of her soul. In his treatment of women and prostitute, Manto demonstrates that he is capable of profound psychological insight, creating real people and not pretexts for reformist sermons. As Leslie Flemming says, "He paints, the reality he sees, and "[i]f you cannot bear these stories that means this is an unbearable time. The evils in me are those of this era". The reality of his fallen women is one of disgrace

marginality and desperation, in a society that exploit them without offering them any space (Flemming, 1979:32).

Another aspect of hypocritical social outlook on women and their quest for human dignity is revealed in the story *Mummy*. Manto writes the story in the first person and uses his own name throughout. The story begins with the narrator-author and his wife on a vacation in Poona. He accidentally meets Chadda, a friend and colleague in the film industry, who introduces him to Stella Jackson, a middle-aged Anglo-Indian woman, whose friends call her "Mummy". Though Manto is initially repulsed by her garish makeup and withered face, he realizes that Mummy is a genuine person who isn't inhibited by social conventions. On the one hand, Mummy has parties where Chadda and his bohemian roommates at Saeeda cottage, who also worked in the film industry, socialize with young women, and together they drink, dance and behave promiscuously. On the otherhand, she is a mother figure to these young people, and the story reaches its climax when she prevents Chadda, her favorite "son", from taking sexual advantage of Phyllis, a naive fifteen year old girl. She also nurses Venkutrey's wife after her miscarriage, looks after Thelma who is infected with a venereal disease, and almost single-handedly is responsible for Chadda's recovery from a near-fatal illness. Whereas Manto admires Mummy, his wife mistrusts Mummy's desire to help her "children". The story concludes with two episodes: an inmate at Saeeda cottage kills another after the latter continuously sexually abuses him, and Mummy is forced to leave Poona when the police try to coerce her to participate in their schemes.

Morally upright, strong of conviction and experienced in life, these 'socially marginalized' women become the axis around whom a large number of people revolve, seeking psychological support, maternal care and emotional protection. The central character, 'Mummy' who we are informed, is the widow of a World War I soldier. She lives in Poona, where her home is the centre of social life for a group of young people. All those men – Chadha, Ranjit Kumar, GhareebNiwaz, Venkutrey and many others who come to her are like her adopted children. With a cat-like attentiveness, she keeps track of each one of them, while in a drunken state; they are not allowed to take liberties with her young girls. Even her favourite, Chadha, is slapped and turned out of her house when he tries to get at Phylis, a mere fifteen year old girl. Chadha ultimately respects Mummy for having checked his animal instincts. It is she who spontaneously takes over the responsibility of nursing him when he falls seriously ill. "In her heart there was love for everyone. Perhaps she had coloured her face, so that the world should not see what she was really like. Maybe she did not have the emotional strength to play mother to the whole world. She had just chosen a few" (303). The story lists a number of instances when Mummy comes to the rescue of one or the other, demonstrating her generosity, the capaciousness of her heart and readiness to help with all her resources. The entire credit for the triumph of truth, that of Ramsingh's confession and the subsequent burial of the murder case in the court, goes to Mummy's conviction and advice that Ramsingh's should simply narrate the truth. Mummy had said to him, "Son, speak the truth. Tell them what happened" (308). But then, eventually, the same Mummy is turned out of the city for being amoral. In Manto's treatment of "fallen women", at first he seems to present the 'stereotype'. Mummy comes across as a procress who runs a somewhat informal brothel. Manto's wife represents the voice of society. She immediately slots Mummy into the Anglo-Indian prostitute role who runs a somewhat informal brothel. By the end of the story Mummy hasn't changed but Manto obviously has. He gets carried away and blatantly makes Chadha indulge in sloganizing, upholding the character of Mummy. "I am sorry she's gone, but I shouldn't be sorry. She has only left Poona. She will go elsewhere and meet more young men like me and she will cleanse their souls and make them whole. I hereby bestow my Mummy on them" (311). As a kind of bawd the heroine of "Mummy" is an outsider of society but nevertheless a role model of gallantry and loyalty.

What shines through the story is Mummy's openness, her position on sexual exploitation and her deep compassion. As Manto put it "Her world was simple and beautiful and reassuring. Yes, there was drinking and sex and a general lack of seriousness, but one felt no emotional unease. It was like the protruding belly of a pregnant women; a bit odd, but perfectly innocent and immediately compressible (307). What is noteworthy about the story in terms of hypocritical social outlook on women, is that Manto makes clear that what

happens openly in Stella Jackson's, drawing-room, the unabashed interaction between the sexes, happens in secrecy and with deceit in middle/upper class households, viz, his friend Harish Kumar the film director who constantly cheats on his wife with lovers, often film stars. My friend Harish Manto writes "was currently trying to seduce his new leading lady, who was from Punjab" (306). Manto's wife who passes judgment on Mummy does not utter any criticism of Harish. A sexual double standard prevails. By the end of the story, the lesson Manto learns is to go beyond superficial appearances. In the story, one of his first observations is of Mummy's make-up, "so grossly painted that it hurt the eye"(292). By story's end, "Her make-up was still flashy, and her clothes even flashier. Her wrinkles still showed, but for me they had come to assume a sacred dimension"(307). Manto goes beyond stereotypes to look at the person within. It is no longer important whether Stella Jackson is a procress or not. She may be, she may not be. Infact the story ends with Mummy leaving Poona because the police were blackmailing her. As Chadha explained to Manto, "They offered to leave her alone if she would do their dirty work for them. They wanted to use her as a procress, an agent. She refused. Then they dug upon an old case they had registered against her. They had her charged with moral turpitude and running a house of ill repute and they obtained court orders expelling her from Poona. If she was a procress, madam, and her presence was bad for society's health, then she should have been done away with altogether. Why, if she was a heap of filth, was she removed from Poona and ordered to be dumped elsewhere? " (311).

What Manto succeeds in doing so well is forcing the reader to examine her/his bases and notions of morality. Besides highlighting the subjugated and secondary status of women in society, *Mummy* holds up a mirror to society's double standards in matters of sexual morality. His characters 'Saugandhi' and 'Mummy' are the stone that shatters this mirror of societal hypocrisy, and challenges the reader to ponder who is really immoral. Is the Municipal Committee's sanitary inspector, who cheats his wife, morally superior to Saugandhi, the woman who is generous, compassionate and softhearted? Or, Is Harish Kumar, the film director who constantly cheats on his wife and views other women stars as commodity, morally superior to Mummy, the woman who upholds the accepted moral code even at extreme personal cost? It's this sense of morality, the reader begin to question after reading these stories. In fact, one finds a 'whore' better and superior to those who profit from her. With "Saugandhi" and "Mummy" Manto does what he always does so well, side with these fallen women in their quest for identity and human dignity and expose hypocrisy and double standards. He converts what would in polite society be considered flaws, into ideals worthy of emulation. Mummy's graceful exit in the end of the story, compel us to rethink the conventional image of prostitutes being dirty and men being faultless. Manto succeeds in accurately presenting the problem of these 'fallen women' of the hallowed society, without subterfuge or exaggeration. His pre-occupation are not the action but the actors and space of the action. "Saugandhi" and "Mummy" are both victims of predominantly masculine society. We discover a savage, merciless masculinity that remains concealed beneath deceptive smiles.

CONCLUSION

Manto's choice of prostitutes, pimps and other sundry characters living on the periphery of society as subjects, tied in well with his values and concepts, which placed the lives of the marginalized and the subaltern in the foreground with a view towards not only questioning the majority discourse about them but also subverting it. In doing so, he pierces the veils of pretence and hypocrisy which characterize male-female relationships in the Indian subcontinent.

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