

# THE PROSTITUTE AS A CITY'S PARADOX: NAVIGATING THE SOCIETY THROUGH THE BODY OF THE FALLEN WOMEN IN THE SELECT STORIES OF SAADAT HASSAN MANTO

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**Abstract:** Saadat Hassan Manto's scathing treatment of the society and the people that live in it makes him create a distinct space for himself in the socio-literary environment of Indian literature. Materializing his enterprise, Manto's female characters stand out and speak for the sadomasochist society. The Prostitution industry -through the eyes of Manto displays the dark underbelly of the developing city thus manifesting into commodified human existence. This paper would discuss stories like, 'Boo', 'Haatak', 'Kaali Salwar' and 'Dus Rupaiyaa' to talk about the ever-growing malaise of sex-slavery and the society amongst which such animosity harbors. The poverty and destitution in Manto's world draw a parallel to contemporary India thus making it all the more important for internalizing him and his iconoclastic ideas. The tattered society that existed then just like it does now symbolize the fact that prostitutes are a transacted handiwork of a diseased social order. The women who are a part of it and the others who compliment the functioning of this infested vicious cycle are reduced to live on the remains of the society. The stories remind us that they are not regionalist case of sexual slavery but they point out to the incessant sexual oppression that Indian women face everywhere. This paper would extensively use the above-mentioned works of the author to paint a picture of the degenerate world around what surprisingly appears to be symptomatic of contemporary India.

**Keywords:** sadomasochism, underbelly, animosity, sexual oppression

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The evil of Prostitution stands as one of the most serious afflictions that is constantly affecting the Indian society and reducing it to inhuman tatters. Manto literary technique was not accepted easily in this society for his absolutely different kind of writing style and his revolutionary fervor which was dominantly present in his works. What separates him from other writers is his choice of characters which is much different from the kind being chosen during the times he wrote. The downtrodden serve as the weapon for him to establish his harsh criticism for the society. Several of his stories explicitly talk about the intricacies of the sex trade, displaying the large-scale exploitation that takes place constantly. Whether it is Sarita, Saugandhi, the anonymous 'Ghatin' woman in Boo; Manto reveals them in a light similar to a kind that has never been done before. In order to understand Manto

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as a writer, his female characters and the institution of Sex Slavery needs to be understood minutely.

Similar to other malaises that breed upon the heart of this nation, Sex Trade has been thwarting on the Indian Subcontinent since as long as human history has been recorded. The Britannica Encyclopedia defines the act of Prostitution in the following manner: 'Prostitution is the practice of engaging in relatively indiscriminate sexual activity, in general with someone who is not a spouse or a friend, in exchange for immediate payment in money or other valuables'(Britannica). The availability of historical evidence helps us understand that the existence of Prostitution as a sexual perversion appears to be one of the most inevitable and universally found concerns that need our attention in the present times. Such instances help us to understand that Sexuality-both as a form of practice and identity functions at one of the crucial junctures of human existence. On reading the works of Saadat Hassan Manto we find the most uninhibited deliberation on the treatment of Sex in society. The stories that I have picked up to discuss about the inevitability of sexual behaviour bring out this idea in its best possible manner. Degrading of sexual behaviour to mere commercial exchange is the central theme of the stories-'Boo', 'Kaali Salwar', 'Haatak', and 'Dus Rupaiyaa'. It becomes evident that women surviving at the margins are constantly being traded in the society. Their bodies are being reduced to mere objects and being bartered in return of ruthless pleasure is what is sickening the society gradually. The constant reduction of women to pitiable, impoverished existences is what appears to be most disturbing today. Within this nexus of human trade that incessantly seems to prosper, there is an idea of patriarchal suppression that is concealed inside. In this vicious cycle where Sex and Gender is politically interconnected, both seem to be difficult to be separated. This process of interconnection is present in all circles and spheres. Writers Matt Reeck and Aftab Ahmad mention about this situation of disorder in their introduction of the translation of the stories of Manto written in and about the dark underside of the city of Bombay. The collection titled, 'Bombay Stories' describe the experiences of the author when he was living in Bombay and helps to build an extensive understanding of Manto's treatment of the sex workers that form an integral part of the city of Bombay. The characters of the stories that are present in this collection are iconoclastic, even after existing on the fringes They refuse to be taken for granted and revolt even after knowing the grave consequences that await them. At this point one is reminded of what Gayle S. Rubin has to say about the social system related to Sex. Rubin talks about the linkage between institutions of sexuality and human action by very appropriately pointing out: "Sex/gender systems are not ahistorical emanations of the human mind; they are products of historical human activity" (Deviations: 61). This statement is found to be materializing and we find its availability as a reader in the story, 'Haatak'. The pimp Ram Lal in 'Haatak' never attempts to realize the incomprehensible suffering of the women he is selling out. We find him to be completely ignorant and unaccepting towards the suffering of Saugandhi, the protagonist. He believes the availability of money in her life makes her condition better than that of his own and how he would be fortunate to be born as a whore. Being a prostitute, he would have continuous availability of money and that would not make him crave pennilessly for his liquor. This instance gives us a glimpse of the crude underside of our living society where individuals like Ram Lal are found almost everywhere. Manto's objective was very clear to him as a writer with a pronounced social perspective: the fact that he chose to talk about the people who survived on the fringes of the society suited appropriately to his choice of characters as they very well brought out his objective of displaying the sexually subjugated, ostracized and suppressed endlessly. It deconstructed the theory of choosing socially 'fit', 'suitable' and acceptable characters as literary characters because

Manto wanted to bring out the stark reality of the diseased, decaying society. On reading Manto we find that one of the major objectives of the writer has been to strip the hidden hypocrisy and pretentiousness towards the idea of sexuality existing around him. He wants to reveal the natural unadulterated individual by exposing the crude reality that lies underneath. This process automatically takes into account the man woman relationship and the complexities that come along with it. This paper would like to put forward the fact that Manto's prostitutes are not only symbols of filth and inhumane social practice but also exceptionally strong and enigmatic women. They are not sad, broken, dejected or shrewd machines as readers expect them to be- they know to give back to the society a taste of its own medicine. On taking into account the literary history of India we find that there exists various myths and legends regarding the origin of Prostitution. According to Sukumari Bhattacharji's research paper titled, 'Prostitution in Ancient India' (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/i369362>) India has had a varied history of sex trade. The epic text Mahabharata mentions about the event of the complete destruction of the Yadava clan which was followed by the women of the clan being abducted by dacoits. In regions of Kuru and Panchalya, there is a mention about the the Brahmin sages Dalbhya Caikitayana and Svetaketu's nephew Astavakra who were deemed as instructors in the field of Erotics. Bhattacharji talks about Vatsyayana who in the Kamasutra talks about the subtle art of seduction. The paper also talks about the Jayopojivins or Jayajivins- a term used to refer to husbands who were dependent economically on their wives who would bring in the income for running the family by selling herself. . Such instances reveal to us some instances through which women were forced to take up prostitution.

She talks about the later Vedic period where the concept of Dakshinas existed which was a fee given to the priest after a religious ceremony was successfully officiated. This fee would include cattle, material wealth and also women of different categories who could be modulated into sexual partners. One of the oldest practices of Prostitution in India is attributed to the Devadasi System where young girls were dedicated to the temple in the name of the Goddess Yellamma. With the onset of British rule in India, this system lost all its pomp and glory and the women had to suffice for themselves by adopting the act of Prostitution. The practice now was excluded and pushed away from the temple and with the arrival of the British, the Devadasis were forced to live a life of extreme poverty, pain and ultimately begging. In the present times, these Devadasis abound in the red-light areas of the country depicting a tale of lifelong annihilation from the normalcy of the society.

The documentary, Prostitutes of God produced by Vice Media successfully and picturesquely displays the horrors of this century old tradition that has destroyed the lives of women through generations. Long before Manto took up his theme of dealing with animal-like and uninhibited expression of sexuality, readers were found to be already familiar in Urdu fiction with works such as Umrao Jan Ada, of depicting the lives of prostitutes but from his own ordinary and realistic perspective, Munshi Premchand (1880-1936) had in his first major novel taken up a similar theme and the novel was written first in Urdu under the title Bazar-e-Husn. Changing his decision later, he published it first in Hindi under the vastly different title, Seva-Sadan (1919) in which he depicted the process through which a simple housewife may be enticed into becoming a prostitute, how the proposed relocation of the courtesan's quarter from the heart of the city to a remote margin becomes a long-ensuing matter of debate among city councilors, and how, in Premchand's social reformist vision, the fallen woman must redeem herself in the end and then dedicate herself to a life of selfless social service. Contrary to this popular theme of mercy and helplessness we find that in Manto's works the protagonists are not

reduced to silent mute toys but revolting, repulsive humane living beings. These women though downtrodden- have feelings, can have disclosures and can be good people who do good to the society even though the society doesn't reciprocate this goodness towards them. In 'Haatak', Saugandhi and her experience of being rejected makes her realize her self-worth in society and she understands that there exists a never-ending crisis in the society which reduces her to a being lying at the mercy of other people. A moment of revelation establishes Saugandhi as a woman who can stand up and revolt against oppression coming from any individual. The intricacy with which Saugandhi's room is described-the objects and the details paint an image of her life and experiences. Harish Trivedi in his research paper. titled, 'Manto, God. Premchand and Some Other Storytellers' makes a mention of this fact by saying:

The primary sensory component here is, of course, the visual, as for example in Manto's acute and elaborate description of the prostitute 'Saugandhi' -sleeping in the dingy little room, which too is described in minute and apt detail, that serves as her home as well as work-place, in the short story 'Haatak'.(64)

The rejection in the form of insult that is thrown at the face of Saugandhi stirs up her entire conscience and self-awakening. This profession had definitely made her come to terms with the dark underside of the patriarchal society, but this was the first time someone threw contempt at her face directly. The immediate objectification faced by her makes her realize her self-worth and she now hold up to the belief that she dresses to suit herself not for some perverse man who used her to gratify his faltering desires. Her consciousness is awakened at this unexpected experience and she questions her own identity. This 'Insult' forms a crucial pivot of the story as it brings about a deep self-awareness in her. This revelation of Saugandhi's character draws our attention to the fact that even the supposedly fallen can rise, if not in the body, then definitely by the soul. This incident is crucial to the understanding of the story.

Another very important short story, 'Dus Rupaiyya' describes the ill that comes along with the presence of something as disgusting as Child Prostitution. While reading Dus Rupaiyya, we meet the child Sarita, in her wimps and fancies, in her subjugation and rejection of merciful remuneration at the end of the story, we meet the woman, Sarita. In Manto one locates the feminist self as he successfully exposes the deep cuts and wounds not only on the bodies of his women characters, but also in the soul-these inflictions gradually become a part of their identity. Irrespective of age, location and experience-the sex workers in his stories are lacking the basic right of self-respect and human dignity. Sarita's innate desire to experience the rides of motor cars and feel the breeze move past her hair seem to be her want to escape from the pitiable condition she actually lives in. Sarita firmly believes that Sex Trade is the reality of all girls her age, and promises her friend 'Shanta' that she would request Shanta's mother to allow her to accompany Sarita to her rides. She wants to share the pleasures of these escapades with her friend too. Sarita says these things without realising that there is a world beyond this drudgery for herself and her friend-as, she is unaware of a safe world beyond a world similar to her own. Sarita and Saugandhi rise up with conviction even after living in distressed and pitiable conditions. They don't compromise with their individuality and the essence that comprises their womanhood. Manto's women who function as prostitutes in the society are way different from the generic description of prostitutes. They stand out in the crowd and do not have this 'waiting to be mercied upon-pathos filled nature'. They do not preach about morality that is almost impossible to

live in this society and work as a metaphor for the degrading patriarchal mindset that exists amidst them. These women are full of rebellion and fight their way out in their world full of suffering and pain. For instance, though the youngest of all Manto's women characters, Sarita's greatness lies in the fact that she reveals herself as a mature individual before the reader unabashedly, without any modifications and that establishes her beauty. Manto's approach towards the portrayal of the child through the portrayal of woman involves a movement away from depicting women as victims of hegemonic forces. His writings present a space where women are not portrayed as simple victims of an ideology, but rather as actively constructing positions for themselves, using discursive constructs. Another crucial story to be understood is 'Boo' where the sexual obsession of men towards women belonging to oppressed classes has been explicitly described. The story "Boo" (Odour), talks about the sexual obsession which arises due to an association developed through smell. The affluent groom Randhir recollects moments spent with a Ghatan woman and how the smell arising from the grim and dirt of her body intoxicated him almost making it impossible for Randhir to forget her. The story describes the continual oppression of several girls belonging to various communities by young men and how these women are reduced to objects-inanimate and unthinking. The obsession about the smell of the naked body of the Ghatan woman becomes a possession for Randhir gradually. His fair, clean and well-groomed wife-another mere sexual object at his hands fails to equate the sexual arousal Randhir has experienced previously. For Manto, the sexual act was co-mingled with the elements, with water and earth and the physical and social environment that one lives in. What appears worth noting here is the mention of the innumerable Christian girls who are bought by Ranbir for the experience of momentary pleasure and how this network of trafficking girls seems to appear as an obvious and inevitable evil possessed by the society. In the story 'Boo' we find that Manto's writing and picturisation style pierces right inside the social sensibility of the reader. The Explicit use of crude irony serves the objective of also making the reader aware of the degree of distortion prevalent in the society around. In the story we find the low-caste tribal female sexual counterpart of the story reduced to an unspeaking individual whose only information we have is her physical details as remembered by Randhir. The distinct smell of her body becomes an obsession for Randhir and the physical attributes are described from the description of the smell. The women characters of Manto in his other stories are different from the protagonist in Boo as she is reduced to being a painting or a figurine and not a human self. Through this character Manto points out towards the sexual objectification meted out towards women belonging to tribes where they are often represented in literature and film as sexually mysterious and particularly prone to carnal passions. Their economic depravity makes them readily available for sexual consumption by the perpetually hungry sadomasochist society. Manto then clarifies: For Randhir, all women are easy to get; it is simply that he has an innate liking for Christian women. Boo stresses on the widespread distinction that exists between tribal women like the Ghatan woman in our story here and the so-called 'cultured', bourgeoisie', 'high-society' women he is married later to. Harish Trivedi in his paper, Manto, God, Premchand and Some other Storytellers' talks about the sensual imagery created by Manto which is instrumental in developing the plot of the story effectively. Trivedi talks about the different levels on which the narration of the story appeals to the reader's mind. There are senses of taste, smell, hunger and most importantly sexual craving that is explicitly described in the story and it is through this imagery that the plot of the story unfolds before us. What is interesting to note here is that both the Ghatan woman and Randhir's bride are described as silent, non-expressive elements who are a crucial part of this viscous cycle of exploitation. They are reduced to being objects that are being used to quench the animalistic thirst of Randhir. Their

sexual, psychological and physical requirements are not talked about-not even considered worth consideration.

In 'Hamaare liye Manto Sahab', Shamsur Rahman Farooqi story has approached —Boo very uniquely. The Ghatan woman serves to the exact sexual taste of Randhir and her body seems to satisfy the unending thirst of Randhir alone. Contrary to this, the reaction of the Ghatan woman remains undeciphered. What is her take on this engagement that Randhir has built? Is she desirably a part of it? Is their reluctance involved? The answers to these questions remain unanswered throughout the story. Since these questions remain unanswered, the reader is compelled to assume that the woman is a mere toy in the hands of not only Randhir but also the society that fails to acknowledge her physical and mental desires. This lack or inability on the part of the society similarises previously discussed characters to this Ghatan woman-she is no different that Saugandhi or Sarita. In fact, further one finds that Randhir's newly wed wife is also reduced to being a passive source of sexual gratification. Both these women have nothing to say, their bodies and sexual sensibilities have been muted. Both these women are exploited at different levels, and their silent passivity is evident of the condition of several such subjugated women.

Manto's 'Kaali Salwar' also received much criticism due to the choice of protagonist being a sex worker. 'Kaali Salwar'(1941) tries to fictionalize the ritual of Muharram, a mourning practice in the Islamic community into the 'gendered' perpetual mourning conditions of sex-workers. The writer this time too with his adept power of picturisation and minute portrayal of women frameworks Sultana as the 'obvious'- she is established spontaneously and naturally before the reader. Sultana reminds of those with the evacuated self- identity but also gets her to the voices of the society; a perfect situation for a woman like her to exist and function. Manto's 'Kaali Salwar' is like a haunting tale of a woman who tries to get out of the web that has trapped her body and mind. Manto, like the designer of this society gives different sketches of the women characters to make his association with Sultana clear. It also clearly establishes Sultana's position in our society. She is the protagonist for 'Kaali Salwar'-the story which portrays the facets of different kinds of people in Sultana's world. The symbolism of the usage of 'Kaali Salwar' points towards Manto's ability to describe the minute details of women like Sultana. Aneyes-Ul-Islam in his thesis titled, A feminist reading of select short stories of Guy De Maupassant and Sadat Hasan Manto translates the words of Waris Alvi as:

When a woman becomes a prostitute, the woman in her does not die but she continues to live with her human behaviour and demands. Manto wants to see those glimpses of the prostitute, living in the stinky environment of prostitution, that narrates the story of humanism and womanhood, and that is why he is characterizing them in his stories. Manto does not sentimentalize and idealize the prostitute. In order to show her moral personality, he never presents her doing some work of disinterested and sexual sacrifice because morality can never be the scale of Manto for judging a prostitute - her righteousness and wickedness. (Alvi,163)

What separates Kaali Salwar from other stories is the deep portrayal of the psyche of the protagonist Sultana here. Sultana has been compelled to live this life of earning only through constant sex work and the story emphasises on the shame, discomfort and suffering that comes along with this profession. Sultana's business flourishing in Ambala, her meeting the unscrupulous man-Khuda Baksh and her life going through various changes is what comprises the plot of the story. Our protagonist assigns faith in Khuda Baksh that emerges due to innate love and desire for

companionship, but she is reduced to nothing but an economic and sexual means of desire fulfilment. Manto choosing to make prostitutes as his protagonists could be related to the idea where these sex workers are found to be located at the confluence of urbanisation and human development. Their existence serves as an example of large-scale exploitation. This locational ostracization is found in Kaali Salwar. The victims bring out the alienation, marginalisation and the duplicity that they face every day in the hands of the society. Manto's sex workers are similar to us-how they live, the way they celebrate festivals, the way they fear the wrath of God-all make them similar. Sultana and Saugandhi's rooms and their idea of religion establishes them as humane as any of us. This makes us realise while reading these stories that these women are forced to become different because of the discriminating attitude of the society practised on them.

The manner in which he explicitly unleashes the complexities of the human mind exposes Manto's leanings towards Freud all the more. In describing the human mind, we learn about the cruelties inflicted on this society due to the perversions of the human mind. Manto attempted to strip the mask of the hypocritical world. His stories have become popular and widely accepted today as it has successfully raised a voice against institutions that promote oppression and domination promoting inequality in the society around.

In his work, 'Swaraj Ke Liye', (For Freedom's Sake) Manto emphasises on the importance of having a sexual identity and practice that does not involve guilt, without which the other social institutions of human life-marriage and patriotism cannot be practised properly. This kind of forward thinking and the materialisation of this literary idea by choosing pimps and prostitutes as his protagonist is what makes Manto relevant even today. These 'Afsaane' talking about sexual subjugation and slavery invoke elements of Psychosexual Development, the Social decadence and degradation of Humanity in general. It makes us recapitulate the fact that the mortal animal is alive and ticking constantly within us. On a concluding note, one can aptly remember what Manto writes in his essay Beautiful Girls will Be Harassed which talks about the inevitability of the suppression of women as long as human civilisation shall survive:

As long as men are put next to women, this harassment will happen. There might come a time when women's existence is no longer necessary for men and this will stop by itself. But not before that time is this going to end" (Beautiful Girls will Be Harassed,39)

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