

Selected Stories of Manto: A Subaltern Study

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ABSTRACT:

Manto is one of the few authentic voices for the subaltern as he doesn't deal with sentimentality rather what he claims to present are honest testimonies of the characters. So, how does Manto who belonged to a privileged class can be one of the true voices of the subaltern? In this paper, I've picked up three stories from Nandita Das' collection of stories from Manto, as a translation in English. Since the work is originally written in Urdu and not in English, it is not justified to analyze the language he uses but we can at length discuss his treatment of characters, themes and society. Some more questions addressed in the paper are: Are our characters subaltern? If, they really our subaltern, can they speak for themselves? If not, who speaks for them? Does anyone who is not a subaltern can speak for them? Will they be true?

Keywords: *The Insult, A Hundred Candle-Power Bulb, Behind the reeds, Manto, subaltern*

Introduction: result and discussion:

Who is a subaltern? According to critical theory and post colonialism, the term subaltern designates the populations which are socially, politically, and geographically outside the hegemonic power structure of the colony and the colonial homeland. Somdev Banik[1] argues that the subaltern are not unique to the postcolonial period and nor can they be reduced to a homogeneous group characterized only by their marginalization (180), contrary to [2]Gayatri Chaturvedi Spivak's belief that the subaltern cannot speak for themselves and hence it is necessary for post colonial intellectuals to speak on their behalf. Who speaks for the subaltern? Can Manto, who belonged to a privileged class, be one of the true voices of the subaltern?

Materials and Methods:

In this paper, the researcher has picked up three stories from Nandita Das'[3] collection of stories from Manto, as a translation in English, "*The Insult*," "*Behind the Reeds*" and "*A Hundred Candle-Power Bulb*." The researcher will analyse these stories in relation to Manto's life and other works to assess whether Manto can be called a true voice for the subaltern.

According to a broader understanding the 'subaltern' here are not limited to simply those who are non-Western or colonised but the term can be referred to any member of a community that is generally marginalised and thus misrepresented. According to Gramsci[4] the only defining characteristics of the subaltern groups are two: 'submission to the dominant class' and 'the inability to unify' (Buttigieg 36). Hence, people of colour, LGBTQ, the differently-abled, and/or women can be termed as subaltern. Our characters are women living in the fringes of society, they are not part of the mainstream society or at least that is what the society likes to believe even though they are very much there. Now why these women could be understood as a subaltern subject should be justified beforehand. The woman in a patriarchal society is already a marginalized entity, in a post colonial setting, doubly so, as the man himself is marginalised according to his caste, social status and religion. In such a world, these women that Manto wrote about are triply marginalized as even the women too

look down upon them and considered beneath them. Even though parts of India, allow legalised prostitution, it is not a profession, people are yet ready to discuss or accept.

Now that it has been established that our characters are subaltern, we move to the next question, i.e. can the subaltern speak? [5]Guha in his famous “*On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India*”, published in 1988, indicates a common trait which the subaltern groups share: “In spite of such diversity, one of its invariant features was a notion of resistance to elite domination” (Guha 4).

In the two stories, *The Insult* and *A hundred Candle-power bulb*, the protagonists resist against their situations but it is not a case of full liberation.. Manto’s Marxism here is gendered, without any doubt the women are suffering more because they are a woman and an exploited male worker would not be struggling the same. [6]Manto’s essays (1955) show major concern with the desperate state of sexual workers, and it is through his feminism that he discards the abstract notion of subalternity and highlight how gender makes “the woman who didn’t have a father’s shelter, had no education, ...a broken pebble from the pavement” (204). The short stories are not, as they may seem in abstract terms, empowering; they are a wretched cry that ends in silence — there is nothing to be done. There is a clear aspect of long silence in these stories instead of the freedom to express and oppose. Hence, it is clear that only the efforts of the marginalised is not enough and we need to have people from the main stream to speak for the subaltern.

Who, then takes up the responsibility for speaking for the subaltern? The problem with writers is that the representation of the subaltern is relative to the context of the writer representing them and any privilege that writer may have over them in terms of race, class, and/or gender. Most writers either misrepresent the subaltern or victimize them to a level that we feel pity for the characters but feel no association and the stories are forgotten in a while, but not with Manto. Manto belongs to a long tradition of highly gifted authors who had the occasion of personally encountering and confronting the cumbersome machinations and the at times mindless and oppressive logic of authority. His fiercely independent and diverse expositions of overt and implicit exploitations through the mechanisms of colonialism, nationalism, religion, class, and sexuality, irked many; his stark exposes of the dark and sombre facets of the human condition regularly riled up ideological adversaries as well as prudish aesthetes. And the more they berated and ostracized him the more scathingly he wrote. He was charged criminal trials in and after the colonial rule, both in India and Pakistan for allegedly obscene writing. Before, we move into how he dealt with the subject of subalternity and whether or not he was able to do justice to his characters, let’s understand the man and why prominent amongst the several accusations routinely hurled at Manto, most popular was that of writing obscene stories.[7] In another famous essay *Lazzat-e-Sang (The Taste of Stones)*, a typically candid Manto retort to the charge of obscenity as:

God alone knows why the prosecution describes a short story as obscene when it is not even remotely so – if I want to mention a woman’s breasts then I will call them a woman’s breasts – a woman’s breasts can’t be called peanuts, or a table or a shaving razor – though it has to be said that for some people the very existence of women is an obscenity, but what to do of that ... (636-637).

When the prosecution or the witnesses or the court pointed to an extract that they thought were particularly offensive choice of words in his stories, Manto would counter:

There are few words that are obscene per se. It is usage which can make the chastest of words obscene. I don’t think anything is inherently obscene. However, even a chair or a cooking pot can become obscene if presented in such a way – things can be deliberately made obscene to serve a particular purpose (633).

But why write on a potentially sexual theme in the first place? To this Manto retorted that he refused to be cowed into restricting himself to themes that some officially sanctioned morality approved of. In his own words:

A hardworking woman who finds peaceful sleep at night cannot be the heroine of my story. My heroine would rather be a harlot who lies awake at night and whose day-time rest is often disturbed by nightmares of impending old age – her heavy eyelids encrusted by years of lost sleep can be the theme of my story. Her filth, her ailments, her irritability her profanities – they all appeal to me – I write about them – and I bypass the soft speech, the glowing health and the sophistication of domesticated women (619-620).

He agrees that the sequence of events in the story may be thought vulgar in isolation, but they were necessitated by the demands of realism and the plot of the story was neither obscene nor did they incite licentious behaviour. He pointed out that there would always be those who would see obscenity where it did not even remotely exist, and thus the fault lay with their tainted gaze and not in the artist's art.

In his story prostitution is seen as an industry. The exchange of money is continuously highlighted, and also the dependence of all the characters on it. He highlights how society should take responsibility for the state of prostitutes in a very straightforward manner. Consider, for instance, the following statements: [8]

What reason could there be for such hatred to be shown only when a woman offers to sell what she has of value –her body? A woman who honestly puts her wares on display, and sells them without an intention to cheat, is such a woman not virtuous? (204-205)

On the other hand, he expresses his concern and solidarity for the women who are nothing but slaves of the patriarchal capitalist system. A system which is corrupted morally to such an extent, that it condemns its most diligent worker to the label “whore”. Manto for his readers reinforces the idea that women as prostitute are a handiwork of an artificial social order created by and for men where women are transacted, exchanged, traded and stocked in the form of a commodity. The prostitute remains to be considered. Explicitly condemned by the social order, she is implicitly tolerated. But how does Manto achieve all of this?

To understand Manto's craft, we'll look into the three stories. The pimp Ram Lal in 'The Insult' doesn't understand the inexplicable suffering of the whores he sells. He says "But at least you find a way to get liquor. I swear to God, when I see your empty bottles and smell the wine, I really want to be reborn a whore" (48). The exhausted opening of the story relegates her sexuality as purposeful. A deeper reading finds it hollow and strikes it against the apparently more wholesome 'wife' (Dharam patni). The class difference is introduced as she calls him 'seth' (sir) and in that manner, she willingly allows him some authority –a socially higher status as well as command over her sexuality. [9]This desperate outlook towards her routine made her sexuality commercial, object like and property to her room –chaotic, messy, uncared for, and in a search for a definitive ownership. In effect, then her sexuality carries no identity except that which comes through the geography and anatomy of the room she was housing in. She wishes for love to melt within her body, in a manner that is deeply maternal and nurturing but sexual. Second, Sugandhi's walk in her floral sari to the gentleman's car places her outside the comfort and security of her room and stands her at the end of the lane which metaphorically could be the boundary between the dominant national male and the secular prostitute. The dialogues and condescending action of the gentleman then silently but not surprisingly lead to the eventual insult that crash of her self –esteem as she already is vulnerable to the national. It is one thing, as Manto portrays, to crave/desire to be the woman and another to be rejected by the arrogance of the masculine and the convenient patriarchy that society allows.

Result and Discussion:

In all three stories, the protagonist is a prostitute. But they are not alike at all. In the world, where we only see women as a virgin, a mother or a prostitute, Manto presents a more human and inclusive identity of these characters. In “The Insult” Sugandhi's character is a prostitute who is longing for commitment and love. When Seth leaves her side early to go back to his loving and caring wife, she automatically becomes the other. She has the capability to love anybody and finds a home in Madho. Madho, in turn, exploits her physically and monetarily. In the end, she is left alone in an empty room, where she pets her dog like a mother and falls asleep. On the other hand, in “Behind the Reeds” the girl doesn't even know she is a prostitute. She thinks it is usual for girls to have such relationships and loves and takes care of each man carefully. She has a child-like innocence and is ignorant towards life on the other side of the reed. In the third story, A Hundred Candle-Power Bulb, however, we see another contrasted figure of the woman who is so tormented with lack of sleep and rest, that instead of the image of a mother or caregiver, she turns into a killer. Manto does not believe in the myth of women rather presents how he sees them in the society. He does not try to categorize them or label into a particular section but as individual characters in his stories are sketched, often blurring lines between facts and fiction.

He also throws light on the treatment of subaltern women as commodities by the men belonging to the upper section of the society. Whether it is the girl in “behind the reeds,” Sugandhini or the unnamed woman in “A Hundred Candle- Power Bulb” they all are used by the men in exchange of some money, and other people like Sardar, Madho and the broker, too gain interest from this exchange.

His portrayal is not only limited to the sexuality and characteristics of these women, rather he presents a very personal understanding of his characters. These women have similar wants like any other women in the world. The woman in "A Hundred Candle- Power Bulb" just wants to sleep while Sugandhini wishes to build a home with the person she loves and the one who loves her back. These are very basic wants for anyone to have but their condition does not allow them to achieve what they desire. Even the people who are marginalized but not as much as these women do not hesitate in exploiting the people.

He doesn't show them as a victim, but a woman with all kinds of desires. Nawab has grown in a place akin to the "cave" that Plato uses as an allegory in his book Republic. Manto says that Nawab is not at all aware of the social order and perhaps she thinks that what she does is the norm. In her routine lies a monotony that does not faze her because she is not aware of the world beyond those reeds. In this sense Nawab is different from Saugandhi, the character in "The Insult" who knows her social status and rather lives in a well defined space-time, aware of her predicament. Nawab is triply marginalized, though Saugandhi is not better, although Saugandhi acts the roundness of character that Nawab lacks.

Conclusion

Now, we go back to the question, why is Manto any different than the other writers, for example, Mahashweta Devi. On one hand, where Mahashweta Devi evokes sentimentality and sympathy for her characters, Manto does not provide this liberty to his readers. He only presents facts and an emphatic gaze towards his characters. He always maintains an emotional distance from his characters, which is rare in subaltern studies. Even though Manto did not belong to the subaltern he observed the prostitutes very closely in his neighbourhood and craftily sourced many of his stories.

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