

# EMPOWERED AT THE MARGINS: WOMEN IN MANTO'S STORIES

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**Abstract-** Saadat Hasan Manto's short-stories are characterized by his unapologetic brave voice, and in that they are empowering. They are populated by women characters, often sex-workers who despite their victimization and marginalization strive to make a living and try and make sense of their scattered realities. However, are these women from his stories only helpless victims, as we have come to see them in popular opinion, or do they also, at times as a result of their marginalization, exercise an agency? Research on his short-stories has had as its centre of focus their importance as partition narratives within the domains of sex, sexuality and gendered violence. Although there have been extensive feminist readings of his works, they have only managed to see the female in his works as a permanent victim, with no agency or influence whatsoever. Contrary to these opinions, some of his characters do exercise an agency to influence the lives of others or at times to create a self-identity, as in 'Mozail' or 'A woman's life'. This paper analyses these two short-stories from *kingdom's End*, a collection of English translated short stories, to support the observation made above. Although these readings are done through the lens of feminism, they are different from those done before because here these short-stories are looked at as narratives where the characters are not limited to their status as victims but also become agents in their own right. This paper might enable us to read Manto through a new perspective, one that opens us up to the subversive attitudes his characters embody and their empowerment as a result of being situated on the fringes of the victimizing centres.

**Keywords:** Manto, Mozail, A woman's life, Kingdom's end, feminism

Saadat Hasan Manto is perhaps the most widely read Urdu short story writer. Widely translated, his stories have, as their most powerful motif the female condition (often made visible through their sexuality) during those times. Manto wrote more than about half-a-century ago; however his work still holds relevance for not only his content which, albeit fictional, is as historical as any document in the portrayal of the times but also for his style — unapologetic, brave and sharp. In addition, it must be mentioned that translations of his works have largely failed to carry the characteristic elements of his prose across languages. In that case we have hardly read Manto.

This section deals with a review of literature which will look at the research undertaken on Manto's work, especially his short stories and their women protagonists.

## Relevance of Manto today

The relevance of a research project rests primarily on its subject. It is then important to establish the necessity and validity of the subject matter in the current times. In his paper *IS MANTO NECESSARY TODAY?* (Translated into English by Leslie A. Flemming) Salim Akhtar posits that an artist is relevant so long as their work can find readers through changing times. For him, the longevity of a text and by extension the author's depends on certain "something else" (Akhtar and Flemming 1) which makes the text stand out. This special element can vary from reader to reader. Akhtar also claims that "the meaning of a work does not reside in stylistic beauty" (1). I would actively disagree with the last statement because style and content are often complementary and in fact inseparable in the best of writing, style and form do add meaning to a text. To use style and content to support one another in meaning making renders a beauty to the style on account of its awareness of the content. The meaning of a work then does, to whatever extent, reside in stylistic beauty. This point will be further supported later in the review by Alok Bhalla's through his comments on translation(s) of Manto.

Akhtar goes on to say that Manto laid the foundation of sexual realism in Urdu literature. Manto's works are indeed realistic; it is this realism that brings out sex and sexuality from behind latched doors and secretive experiences to the pages of his stories. He brings out the hidden realities, which were treated as taboo subjects, and lays them bare in his words for the public. The naked body, sex and sexuality become motifs in his stories to criticize the society. These subjects are a dominant theme in most of his stories: *A wet afternoon* (which is based on a lesbian relationship), *Colder than Ice*, *Khushia* or even *Mozail*.

Akhtar identifies Manto to be among the few writers in Urdu to practice verbal economy. Furthermore, he identifies Manto's characteristic use of internal elements and his typical abrupt endings. When Akhtar makes these points, he is in a way giving importance to the stylistic features of Manto's writing and countering his earlier point that meaning is not made through stylistic beauty. Manto's writing, says Akhtar, must be read within the social context of its temporal setting. It is, like he implies, an undeniable precious source reflective of the time but is also universal in its representation of human co-existence in times of conflict.

As it has been mentioned before sex is a strong motif in most of Manto's works. Akhtar, I think, explains it with a deep understanding:

Manto felt compelled to induce neither pleasure nor disgust, but rather presented sex simply as sex. Manto did not see sex as some situation separated from ordinary life in his stories. [It] was an eloquent metaphor for informing the human psyche and a simile for manifesting the beauty and baseness of life. (Akhtar and Flemming 2)

Like he goes on to say, sex does become a mode of protest. Akhtar concludes by saying that Manto is necessary today for the moral courage his writing embodies: to face bitter truth and express it openly.

### Understanding Manto's Writing

A good number of sources reflecting on Manto's works believe with good reason that the writer has been widely misunderstood. Among his critics, "those against Manto have censured him unreservedly, while those who have praised him have generally done so apologetically or defensively" (Akhtar and Flemming). These biases or misunderstandings have, knowingly or unknowingly, shaped translations of his work and commentaries on the same. One understands then that although Manto is an old writer his writing has not been looked at with adequate honesty and that there is a need and scope of re-reading him. Carol Coppola in her review of a work on Manto by Leslie A. Flemming brings out several points that make the above mentioned observations. Dr. Flemming in her work quotes Frank O'Connor, who says that a short story characteristically deals with "those at the fringes or outside of civilized society... the short story conveys an "intense awareness of human loneliness." (Coppola 219). Manto's stories fit this understanding of the short story form. His protagonists are people living at the margins of civilized society, commonly prostitutes. While this has been identified along with the fact that Manto presents such characters to us in a humane light, there is still scope of us to read how these characters acquire an agency because of their being marginalized, which can be seen in his stories like *Mozail*.

Commenting on his writing style, Flemming recognizes a characteristic aspect (from influences of writers like Gorky, Gogol and Maupassant) of his writing; the "overwhelming preference for sympathetically portraying characters oppressed by social institutions" (Coppola 220). Often religion becomes one of these social institutions for Manto considering that the fuel to partition was communal hatred and religious conflict at some level. Going back to the portrayal of women prostitutes within the larger domains of sex and sexuality:

"a number of Manto's stories.... have prostitutes as their heroines. Dr. Flemming argues that these are not stories about prostitutes. These stories are studies in the loneliness and despair not only of prostitutes, but of oppressed women everywhere. Given the recurrent theme of the exploited prostitute in these stories, Manto felt that the prostitute and her situation were merely symbolic of the subjugated and dependent role...forced on women. (Coppola 221).

While within the academia and I believe among the majority of educated people, Manto is no longer seen as a sensationalist and an obscene writer—a view which was propagated during his time and might still be carried forward by certain people in certain spaces, there is still a need to understand his writing for its deeper meanings and implications to be able to fully appreciate his work.

### Manto's subjects

"Manto's characters inhabit the monumental fringe of Indian society." (184) says Mahnaz Ispahani in her general review of Manto's works. An important observation she makes is that his work often reads like journalistic naturalism—"about alienation and sexual violence, by blighted endings." (Ispahani 184). All academics have somewhere or another commented on Manto's portrayal of women in his stories. According to Ispahani, his women characters are represented through their sexual vulnerability through events like sexual humiliation, rape, prostitution etc. She believes "they are almost always victim, with the power only to occasion their own destruction." (Ispahani 186). While this seems to be true in most of his stories, since they are realistic in nature and are reflections of what Manto saw in society, like he has himself said. However, I believe, there are instances in some of his stories where his women protagonists have the power to save somebody else although it might be at their own cost, so in some ways they also have a power to affect someone else's life in a constructive way. One instance of this might be seen in the story *Mozail*.

Ispahani further points out that Manto's partition stories might come across as "overwrought, but these fictions were no stranger than fact." Connecting this to his representation of women and sex in his stories, one realizes that the horrors were not obscene or sensational but only realistic. She also talks about the objectivity in Manto's writings. He did not "[take] sides in the religious and political wars being fought around him. In his partition stories he reflects not on politics or history but on the meanings of loyalty and dishonour, sanity and insanity, good and evil." (Ispahani 188). In a time marred by riots and violence when the ideas of what it meant to be humane were lost, he raised those questions through his stories; by writing what he saw. Ispahani rightly observes that Manto conveys the disorientation, mystification and the nonsense that fell upon the subcontinent as no historian or politician could (190).

In the paper titled *HUMANITY AT BAY: THE CONFLICT BETWEEN MEN AND THE WORLD IN THE STORIES OF GORKII AND MANTO*, Kaplan and Dulai analyse the similarities between Manto's and Gorkii's characters. Dulai and Kaplan make the observation that in their stories "not everyone in the exploited class is weak. [their stories have] individuals who, in spite of their disadvantageous situations, manage not only to carve a tenable existence for themselves alone, but also strive to help other in similar circumstances." (1). This is a rare observation but one that is really important because it helps us read deeper into how the characters in their stories function. This observation can easily be contextualized in Manto's character *Mozail* who risks her life to save another woman's. Another similar observation they make is that their stories also contain characters "who have the capacity to find fulfilment in themselves as individuals." (Dulai and Kaplan 3), as is seen in the character of Saugandhi from Manto's *A Women's Life*.

### Manto: lost in translation?

In his paper *The Politics of Translation*, Alok Bhalla illustrates the fact that translators of Manto have largely misunderstood and censored him for the non-Urdu reader. In this paper he's talking only of English translations. Bhalla begins with pointing out the obvious fallacies of translation into English from a heavily phonetic language like Urdu. He believes that

while it is possible to accurately translate Manto into English, the translation may “fail to capture the grating roughness of his diction...and the harsh rhythms of his prose. In order to be effective it would have to cause...the same sharp lacerations on the reader’s soul as Manto’s Urdu original.” (Bhalla 20).

Bhalla recognizes Khalid Hasan as the best-known translators of Manto into English. However, he identifies numerous flaws within his translation throughout the paper. Although he focuses on the translated collection *Mottled dawn: Fifty sketches and stories of Partition*, the paper clearly brings out a misunderstanding of and a compromising attitude of the translator towards Manto’s original works. My readings of his short stories have also been through Hassan’s translation in *Kingdom’s End* and therefore the same limitations are bound to have crept in it as well.

Bhalla believes Hasan’s translation to be “highly inaccurate and disfigure[ing] the original” (20). He further illustrates decisions on the part of the translator which clearly raises questions about his ability to do justice to Manto’s works. Hasan:

Creates for us a Manto who is substantially compromised and damaged as a writer...He dismembers and scramble their structures, deletes paragraphs, summarizes significant dialogues, omits details about characters, transforms long monologues into comfortable paragraphs... [and] make(s) Manto both into a communal partisan and a weak storyteller.

He further criticizes Hasan’s translation for he believes these violations change the original to an extent that Manto’s complex representations of partition are reduced to ordinary, predictable narratives. It is only the power in Manto’s stories that help him survive the translation according to Bhalla.

Bhalla does a comparative study of Manto’s original poem titled *Sorry*, translated with the title *Mishtake* by Hasan. He illustrates how the decisions undertaken in the translation show a poor understanding of Manto’s spirit and stylistic or word choices. For instance Bhalla points out an instance when Hasan substitutes the “vulgar and aggressive theatricality of the expletives” (7) by decorous words, and says that Manto’s use of such language had a purpose; for Manto Partition debased language along with people. In addition to misunderstanding Manto, Hasan deliberately censors Manto’s portrayals; he “underplays all religious references which Pakistani nationalists or Muslim fundamentalists may find problematic.” (Bhalla 26)

This research article by Alok Bhalla in presenting various instances of compromises made by Hasan (regarded as the ‘best’ English translator of Manto) points to the undue treatment Manto’s works have received. It is in that disfigured form that his work has reached most of his readership. Until a translation that does justice to Manto’s spirit emerges, we will only read him in a haze; our appreciation and understanding of him will remain incomplete, diluted and reductive.

### Women in Manto’s short stories

In her work titled *Reclaiming Humanity: Women in Manto’s short Stories*, Raza Rumi looks at Manto’s female characters and tries to understand their importance in his works. She rightly observes that the women characters in his stories are often “complex, and sometimes ambiguous metaphors of humanity.” (Rumi 75). She further goes on to say that other than the stories of partition, Manto’s works are constituted by strong women characters. Rumi believes that “Manto’s female characters appear as defiant...even though their circumstances are mired in taboo and social marginalization.” (Rumi 76). Although Rumi has does not see partition stories presenting women characters as strong or with an agency, I believe at least some women characters from partition stories do exercise their agency and hence can be seen as strong.

There is then the question of most of his female characters being sex workers or victims traditionally shunned by the society. Rumi sees Manto as a humanist and through his choice of such characters as protagonists of his stories he shows how “even the dregs of the earth like prostitutes and swindlers had innate humanity and in many cases proved better beings than the pious and the moralists.” (76). Perhaps through these characters Manto criticizes society for treating them the way it does and also by showing their humanity through these stories and therefore mocking the social order which ostracizes them on account of being ‘immoral’ and ‘impure’. These representations “evoke a deeper understanding of the hidden agenda of a hypocritical society.” (Rumi 76). In several instances Manto’s women characters are more powerful than virtuous wives, and are courageous enough to exercise their agency and establish their individuality.

Rumi points out that Manto presents a nuanced portrayal of women characters in his stories, it is this which makes his women characters extremely powerful characters in the effect they have on the readers. There is also recognition of Manto’s open emphasis on Women’s anatomy and the naked body. I believe that for him the human body, especially the women’s, becomes the land on which the horrors of partition played out. He “blends the Partition holocaust so meticulously into the lives of his characters that it creates a living memory of the bloody event. It is the most powerful metaphor for what humans did to each other during the 1947 bloodshed.” (Rumi 81)

Rumi presents to her reader an interesting view of Manto’s women characters, who were usually sex workers. She says:

To understand Manto’s perception of women, it is best to look at some of them as they are portrayed in his stories. The first facer that strikes you is the immense diversity and colorful range of characters. In Manto’s literary oeuvre, no two women are alike. The notion of the prostitute...works because it was these women that could claim to be free. The sex worker is free, even though the choices she has to exercise her liberty are constrained, and constrained by the same rules that keep the homemaker’s freedom in check. (Rumi 83)

Rumi understands and presents to us the finer aspects of women characters in Manto’s works; they are complex, subversive and, in their own ways, redefine the identity they have been casted into by the society.

### Conclusion

Clearly, there is a great deal of research that can be done with regard to Manto’s works, on account the extensive misunderstanding and censorship his work has been subjected to. Translation studies remain one major domain to problematize the manner in which his writings have been circulated among the readership. There has, however, emerged some well thought analysis of his writing in understanding his women characters, although there still seems to be a lot of scope for engagement with



the manner in which their empowerment or its absence has been seen within his stories. Although some critics do see his female characters as empowered individuals in his non-partition stories, which is quite evident. I believe Manto's women characters are endowed with an agency even in his partition narratives, maybe not in all of them but in a number of them, yes.

RQ: How do marginalized Women characters exercise their agency in Manto's short stories, especially in his partition stories?

Manto's short-stories, in his times, were blandly criticised and branded as obscene and pornographic. This blatant response to the writer's works was not only for the themes he engaged with but also for his characterisation—the characters of his stories challenged all notions of sexuality, gender, patriarchy and so on. His most memorable narratives are stories of pimps and prostitutes; of characters who do not find acceptance from the society that is to a great extent responsible for the choices they have had to make since many of them are victims of physical and sexual abuse who are, as a result, shunned because of “the social unacceptability of a “despoiled” woman.” (Jain 1659). Furthermore, Robinson argues that most of the women engaging in prostitution have a history of physical and sexual abuse’, in that case, it becomes more an issue of exploited adolescents than a choice (23). Manto's situating his characters in certain spaces is his way of questioning the society and its norms, of placing a mirror before it to make it conscious of its prejudices, hypocrisy and the vegetative state it is in. Majority of these stories— of marginalised or victimised individuals— is framed within the larger narrative of the indo-Pak partition. The story of these individuals takes up a deeper significance in this that it brings to the fore the violence, chaos and uncertainty that defined the personal lives of people in that setting, but more importantly, its specific importance in the kind of protagonists these stories are about and their ability to find a space of agency for themselves at the peripheries. Manto's engagement with his female characters is unique in respect of the roles women characters usually play in most male narratives. Jain notes that “male narratives locate events at the centre of the story—incidents such as rape, escape, massacre. Women are either absent or objectified as victims”. (1657). This is not the case in Manto's works; the women in his stories are not engaged with as two-dimensional minor characters that support a male protagonist's storyline but are fleshed out with a depth and complexity befitting the subject and themes of the stories they populate.

Manto superimposes the physical brutality of partition with the ideological brutality that sex and sexuality are subjected to within the social structure of the Indo-Pak subcontinent. Most of Manto's characters are not only female—further victimised on account of their subjugation to the male— but females who are sex-workers and prostitutes; they are marginalised to an even greater extent for not only being women but deviant women. These narratives have majorly been seen as stories of these marginalised women who are powerless in the face of such victimisation and ostracisation by the society and have no power to change or influence either their or anybody else's lives whatsoever because of their lack of agency. However, are these stories a mere acceptance of the fate the society wants these characters to accept for themselves—that their situation is helpless or does Manto also portray subversive elements in his plots which can be identified with in-depth readings. On a deeper engagement with the narratives one realises that the latter is true and that ironically it is these marginalised spaces that, in certain ways, enable them—the marginalised deviant women— agency. The female characters in Manto's short stories, often sex-workers, are not always only victims but at times can also be seen to exercise an agency because to the marginalized spaces they inhabit. He, in these stories,

shows how the marginalized, the social rejects, the non-conformists, the stigmatized and the powerless are equally capable of noble acts as those whom society embraces, who are a part of the centre, who it is believed form its edifice, who conform to its norms, who are venerated and are powerful. (Raza 189)

The paper, through a reading of two of Manto's translated short stories— *Mozail* and *A woman's life* attempts to show how the characters within these narratives are able to exercise an agency despite coming across as seemingly powerless at the surface. These readings, done mostly through the lens of feminism, are also located within the larger discourse of structuralism; of how being situated at the periphery allows for free play and subversion of what the structure stands for, which is not possible as long as one is situated within the confines of the controlling centre. One's true agency and individuality is only situated outside the norms of established behaviour established by the structure which is a patriarchal society in this instance. This form of reading can provide us with a new perspective to engage with Manto's work, especially the kind of subversive attitudes that are portrayed through his characters and as a response to the understanding that power and agency are held only by the centres and that the marginalised are powerless in being devoid of any agency. Engagement with Manto's works has not been extensive, as a result of which we have been deprived of the writer's unique engagement and commentary on gender and power politics, especially in context of the marginalised spaces. The paper seeks to read his texts for a different sort of engagement which can offer us a new perspective on gender, sexuality and marginalisation and their interactions within the settings of his stories.

Choosing characters of prostitutes as his protagonists, Manto makes the point that even they, who have been side-lined to the lowest rungs of the society, can establish an identity of their own. These characters that people Manto's stories have been dehumanised by the society because at a certain point in their lives they stepped out, or were forced to step out, of the boundary society had constructed for them as women, more specifically as females who were to idealise, and aim to become, the perfect domestic woman: docile, subservient, husband- worshipping so on and so forth; they have deviated from the “roles pre-ordained for women— such as mother, wife or daughter— subject positions into which women need to fit themselves” ( Nair 101); they fail or refuse to be a part of that interpellation. Because they are branded as deviant now, since they already have broken away from the society sanctioned notion of a ‘Woman’, there is a partial release of control and although this does not necessarily translate as complete freedom, these characters can in fact create an identity for themselves with far lesser constraints now.

Pramod Nair, summarising Simone De Beauvoir's ideas from *The Second Sex*, points out that women by accepting the stereotypes associated with them by the patriarchal society become their own instruments for self-oppression (88). It then follows that in order to get out of the said oppression; of not being limited to a passive object position but becoming an active subject requires that they break away from the construction of ‘woman’ that has been a part of their conditioning and in fact deviate. Manto's characters are able to break free from this self-restricting system as a result of marginalisation; it enables them to “take

charge of their own choice ... [and] become subjects in their own right" (Nair 88). Once, these characters realise that as a result of their marginalisation they are capable of doing things without the same restraint as before; they begin to realise and subsequently exercise their agency. Before their actions were determined by the male dominated society they were a part of but once they escape it, they can exercise their will outside of constant control, policing and scrutiny. The protagonists from the two short-stories engaged with here are able to exercise an agency which would seem highly improbable were they to do it being a part of the society's fantasy of an ideal female.

The first story under consideration, titled '*Mozail*' after the protagonist, is about a Jewish free-spirited woman who manages to save the life of a Sikh girl, Kirpal Kaur, and her lover, Tarlochan, from a mob of Muslim men on a massacre spree amidst a communal carnage. Mozail is able to save the lives of Tarlochan and Kirpal Kaur, two Sikhs caught among a violent Muslim mob, because she is a Jew and also because she is woman of "loose morals".

Tarlochan, initially in love with Mozail, gives up on her after she leaves him and goes away on the day they were to be wed. His affections are then set on Kirpal Kaur, a religious Sikh like him, who is everything Mozail could not be for him. The characters of Kirpal kaur and Mozail are presented in stark contrast; the former is "soft, delicate and willowy...as unblemished white cotton cloth. She was very shy." (Manto 34). The latter, on the other hand, is described as a girl whose hair "was cut short and looked dishevelled. She wore thick unevenly laid lipstick...wore a loose white dress cut so low at the neck that you could see three-quarters of her big breasts." (Manto 35). Mozail, therefore, comes to embody a headstrong woman who flaunts her body without shame, someone who can never belong to the society whereas Kirpal kaur is shaped along the ideals of a perfect woman— religious, submissive, docile and so on, one fit to be a wife. However, as the story progresses we come to realise rather interesting implications this contrast of characters has for them.

It has been observed that in times of conflict between two communities the women of the other are targeted, this is done in order to emotionally castrate their men for women become symbolic of the male ego and masculinity. According to Veena Das

[It] would create a future memory by which men of the other community would never be able to forget that the women as territory had already been claimed and occupied by other men. The bodies of the women were surfaces on which texts were to be written and read— icons of the new nations. (85)

While Kirpal Kaur is the embodiment of a woman from one of the communities at conflict and, therefore, at risk; Mozail is not. Kirpal Kaur, the ideal image of a woman, is helpless in face of the communal violence whereas Mozail, the vulgar deviant of a woman, exercises a greater agency by manipulating the situation and saving two lives. The partition riots, being communal in nature, place a religious woman like Kirpal Kaur at the risk of her life and honour in this hostile environment whereas Mozail can roam around with little to fear, quite literally "There's no curfew for Mozail" (Manto 43), as Mozail herself declares. Mozail is not only marginalised as a deviant woman but also as one not affiliated to any of the religious groups in conflict; she seems to be hostile towards the blind faith with which people like Tarlochan follow their religion, which for her seems to be the cause of all the violence. Being situated outside the hostile interactions between religions protects her to a great extent from the communal hatred surrounding them.

When, upon her return, Mozail finds out that Tarlochan's new found love, Kirpal Kaur, is under threat because of the communal riots she scolds Tarlochan for his delay in rescuing her and asks him to hurry along with her. Tarlochan points the obvious to her, that there is a curfew but she seems confident and asks him to show her the way anyway. On their way to the locality Kirpal Kaur's family lived in, Mozail is able to fend off a policeman and a Muslim rioter, who is about to kill Tarlochan, because of her seductive manipulation and because of the fact that she is Jew. Arriving at the kirpal kaur's house, they hear her parents' screams upstairs. With no time to lose, Mozail strips kirpal kaur of her clothes and asks her to put on the rather provocative gown she had on herself. The two women exchange clothes and Mozail observes that kirpal Kaur, "the way she's dressed [will] be safe. They'll take her for a Jew [and an immoral woman]." (Manto 48). In the end, Kirpal Kaur manages to escape, whereas Mozail dies in her attempt to distract the Muslim rioters. It must be realised that this only becomes possible through a reversal of identity; the two women exchange clothes and thus meet the fate that was meant for the other. Thus, one realises that being a marginalised woman gives Mozail and agency that Kirpal Kaur could never have and it is as a result of this that she could save the lives of Tarlochan and Kirpal Kaur. Manto, through stories of a character such as Mozail, also attempts to undo the dehumanised position they hold in the eyes of the society; "The non-conformist who was usually shunned or relegated to the margin by the society of Manto's time is not only focussed upon but is glorified by being made into a martyr." (Raza 189)

The other short story titled '*A woman's Life*' is the story of a female sex-worker, Saugandhi, and her breaking away from the residual constraints of patriarchal presences in her life to establish an identity of her own— one not defined exclusively in relation to a man. Saugandhi, initially dependent on Madhu, a pretending male lover, establishes her own identity only when she stops depending on him— a patriarchal presence— for the illusion of love. Although Saugandhi's life is subject to less control by the society, she seems to still carry certain ideas that a woman is usually raised with, one of them being this that they are unfulfilled without a male. She feels a lack within her and believes that only a man can fill it; she desires for a man's love — the kind that extends beyond the physical, to an extent that "when a man said to her, 'I love you, Saugandhi', she would go weak in the knees, although she knew he was lying." (Manto 57), even a vague possibility of the illusion was enough to unsettle her. She finds this love, or at least the illusion of it, in Madhu. Madhu, a sergeant who visits her for a few days every month, claims to love her and care for her and on the surface does not merely treat her as an object of pleasure; he "made her feel like the police sergeant's chosen woman." (Manto 58), "Never before had anyone spoken to her like that...Madhu was different; he told her things nobody ever had and she knew she needed him." (Manto 59).

Even though she knows that Madhu is just a sweet-talker who pretends to love her so that he can take her hard-earned money on every visit of his, she finds the illusion worth exploitation at the hands of Madhu. Depending on Madhu for her sense of identity, she is still constrained by Patriarchy in subscribing to the conditioned notions of what it means to be a woman. She

expects her fulfilment to come from a man who loves her and lets him take financial advantage of her only for the fear of losing him.

As it would happen, one day she is woken up in the middle of the night by her pimp Ram Lal who asks her to ready herself for a rich Seth who's waiting for her in his car outside. She goes out; the Seth looks at her face, illuminated by the flashlight of his car, makes a sound of disgust, and drives off. The incident comes as a shock to Saugandhi, who had never been rejected by a man before. The incident brings her to acknowledge that she is a mere object, a commodity, for the customers that come to her.

She just couldn't forget what had happened. She had been called out to the street and a man had slapped her across the face. She had been looked at as they look at sheep in a farmers' market. A torch had been shone on her face ... and then she had been rejected. If that man came back, she would stand in front of him, tear up her clothes and shout, 'This is what you came to buy! Well, here it is. You can have it free, but you'll never be able to reach the woman who is inside this body!' (Manto 63)

As a sex worker, when even her body is treated as unwanted, she realizes that she cannot let her life depend on men around her, she has to give up this external locus of control she has created for herself in Madhu, after all he is only an imposter. The next morning Saugandhi finds Madhu in her room, as usual after some sweet-talking he tries to get some money out of her. Saugandhi had in her room framed pictures of four of her regulars that she liked— Madhu's picture being one of them. While Madhu is seated there, Saugandhi starts pulling down the frames off the wall one by one until she also takes down the one of Madhu. She sheds off the remains of her male-dependent identity with the ritualistic bringing down of the pictures. She mocks Madhu for his artificiality and asks him to get out, he leaves amidst the barks of her pet dog and her hysterical laughter; she throws him out of her room and her life permanently. Saugandhi, by parting with the illusory expectation of love from a man finds her individuality. She chooses to not compromise anymore and step out of her financial exploitation by Madhu.

The experience with the Seth and the following events are indicative of her breaking free from the ideological control the society still had over her. In freeing herself from those notions, she finds herself free and independent as an individual; "In many ways, Saugandhi's character is more powerful than that of many virtuous wives, a character who has ambition, desires and intelligence to see her own exploitation." (Rumi 78)

Interestingly in both the above discussed narratives, one observes that the realization of agency, following the transformations Manto's female characters undergo, is through their physicality i.e. their bodies. Their bodies become the medium for their being able to exercise this identity or to realise a sense of agency. The body becomes an important part of this transformation because it is this body which is initially limiting for the characters—their having female organs restricts their realisation of an agency in a society where being born with those organs automatically puts one in a powerless position.. However, in another sense they are still defined specifically by their bodies and are therefore still limited. The body is at once limiting and liberating; it is limiting as long as the woman holds onto and functions within the societal construction of a woman's body but becomes liberating once they break away from those notions. In any case, the physical body serves an important symbol in both the above discussed narratives.

In *Mozail*, more often than not, Mozail has to let go of the idea of shame and has to bear a certain violation of her body, either through sight or touch in order to manipulate those around her. For instance, she has to put up with a rioter's lecherous looks and his inappropriate nudge at her breasts in order to save Tarlochan's life. In another instance, Saugandhi's subsequent call to reality happens only through the rejection of her body by a customer. Her body, her only "commodity" to earn a living, when rejected, breaks all her sense of worth and she ends up in a frenzy of sorts. However, she reconciles with the fact that the male objectification and commodification of her is a reality, but also that she as an individual is not limited by how the men she interacts with perceive her as. She rises above the society given understanding of a woman as someone defined solely by her body; she is able to step out of the constructed notion that her body must be desired by men in order for her to validate her existence as a woman—it is this new found understanding that allows her to claim that "in spite of the fact that she sells her body, her customers will never manage to reach the woman inside that body" (Raza 190). She breaks free from the control she had until then entrusted on her customers and her fake lovers for making sense of idea of her idea of self. Their bodies, Mozail's and Saugandhi's, thus become at once liberating and limiting, limiting because in some ways they cannot completely overcome the politics of gender. However, in both cases the body plays an important role to either bring about a change or for them to exercise their agency.

We come to see Manto's characters in a different light in our readings of these two stories; like Mozail and Saugandhi they are not always only victims, powerless to create a self-identity or to influence but often exercise an agency which is oftentimes enabled because of their marginalisation. Manto's stories have primarily been seen to be bleak portrayals of his female protagonists, who seem to have no option other than a silent resignation to their fates, an idea that a number of critics for instance Mahnaz Ispahani propose. Ispahani in her analysis says that

In his female characters, Manto most starkly evokes the physical psychological degradation of the losers and the poor. But sometimes the darkness seems too unrelieved, too much narrowness of vision; his emphasis on the disfigurement of women's spirits and bodies is rarely relieved by a trait of a woman of whole character, with independent emotions. (186)

However, with the kind of readings in the paper, we have realised that there is not narrowness but rather a broadness of vision; his characters are able to rise above their marginalisation and manage to create an identity, establish an independence of character and realise an agency.



There is still a lot of scope for engagement with Manto's works; this paper has attempted to open up one among the many unengaged perspectives, especially in the context of the empowerment of his marginalised female characters through an interaction of feminist-structuralist readings. This research might help readers better understand the politics of power and agency in marginalised spaces and at the same time enable and open up more subversive readings of Manto's short stories.

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