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## Reading the Silence of Women in Saadat Hassan Manto's Selected Short Stories

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### Abstract

*This research paper offers an analysis of a selection of Saadat Hasan Manto's works through a feminist perspective. It explores the feminine content with reference to the suffering and violation of women as a major preoccupation of the selected short stories. As his works indicate, Manto portrayed experiences of women during the time of political upheaval in the subcontinent. He presents the silence of the marginalized women as a source for a deep insight into the patriarchal structures of society. The exposure to violence holds a fundamentally important place in Manto's "Colder than Ice", "Mozail", and "The Return", as they are the means to question gender and sexuality along with the dogmas of race culture and ethnicity. The paper aims to put forth the violence and victimization that women had to endure during the partition of the subcontinent. In light of the feminist theory, the present study analyses the gendered boundaries and objectification of women in the pursuit of male sexual pleasure, unravelling that once the silence speaks, women can make their own place in the world.*

**Key Words:** Gendered Oppression, Colonization, Violence, Hegemony, Resistance

### Introduction

Saadat Hasan Manto was portrayed as being crude and harsh in his subject matters who openly dared to depict the darker side of the subcontinent. The portrayal of women is different in each of his stories. Every woman has her own personality, a different life story facing different issues, but the one thing they all have in common is that they are victimized by the dominant male society. In the course of extreme political unrest in the subcontinent at the time of partition, Manto's stories deal with the chaos, bloodshed and immorality in the strife for independence. He faced many difficulties in his writing career since his subject matters were bold in theme and language. Despite all the challenges being thrown his way, he did not budge in putting forth the truth about the ugliness of society. According to him,

if men are not ashamed and guilty of all the heinous crimes like rape and looting, then why would they feel shy about telling the truth? (Manto 1995). In the stories like 'Colder than Ice', 'Mozail' and 'The Return', Manto became the voice of women. The story *Colder than Ice* depicts the darker and the savage side of a man, wherein a fit of hate, Ishwar Singh, rapes a dead girl from the rival community. Being haunted by the memory and his violent actions, he couldn't return to normality. His wife, Kalwant, is an embodiment of revenge, as Manto creates a sense of justice that the violator of a woman was therefore killed by a fellow woman. The same happens to be the case in the story 'Mozail', a young

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Jew girl presents herself naked as a sacrifice to save another girl from the clutches of savage rapists.

In the masculine colonized world, retaining the female image and voice was challenging for Manto. According to the theorists Liz Stanley and Sue Wise, women's experience constitute a different view of reality, which consist of the entirely different sets of ideas and notions about making sense of the world. To them, the whole social reality appears distinct and different (117).

### Research Methodology

The present study is descriptive qualitative research on Saadat Hasan Manto's selected short stories, namely, 'The Return', 'Colder than Ice' and 'Mozail'; to gain a deeper understanding of the narrative from a different perspective. Particularly the researchers have focused on the element of female silence in Manto's stories and the societal inequalities imposed on the women to take the burden of silence.

The study intends to explore the factors that affect the female agency to carry a load of silence as dictated by men. The research is focused on interpreting the following questions, which are central to the study of the feminist agency in Manto's stories.

1. Why is aggression the primary response of patriarchal men against women?
2. How does the patriarchal society respond if it is met with retaliation by women?
3. How do Manto's stories highlight the inherent flaws of the overarching system of the values within the subcontinent?

### Literature Review

Many feminist theories begin as reactions to women's concerns about gender biases. Women feel estranged because they manifest in themselves the sense of unease that is distantly associated with their gender identity. Marilyn Frye rightly describes that the purpose of feminist theory is to make a display of the experiences and lives of women. It makes sense of the desires, motivations, feelings, actions and reactions without the forces of subservience of women by men. It tries to make sense of the things which didn't make sense before (11-12).

Hilal Ahmad, in his article "Fictions of Intellectual Politics: Manto," highlights that Manto's stories' go ahead of the fictional idealism of his time to unravel the layers of straight and oblique social violence. He goes far enough to affirm that Manto's perspective makes him a 'contemporary' because he was not only interested in the light, but also the dark and savage era he inhabited- which is sometimes can be seen as the time of un-lived present (31-41). Manto was ingenious whose stories still hold the predetermined thought of sorrow, pain and suffering. A similar existential remark has been made by Gopichand Narang when he concludes Manto's distinguishing features. To him, Manto is the masterpiece of the vagueness of conception and in his masterpiece and the prevailing note is that of mourning. The mourning of existence, the lonesomeness of soul, and the immeasurable anguish termed as *Dukha*, a part of the music of vast (Narang 12).

Mohammad Asim Siddique stresses that Manto's writings are mostly concerned with the moral degradation of man and his sexuality and his characters are mostly archetypes who transcend their framework and, most importantly, Manto's subject matters were deeply rooted in his time (Siddique 17-29). Chandra Talpade Mohanty asserts that the construction of the representation of the "third world woman" as at all times and universally subjugated is what maintains the misapprehension of "first world" women's independence: that is the supposition that they are "free, unconventional, and have power over their lives" (333-58).

The way in which gender is at play is as complex as the lives of gendered beings. In unveiling the gendered violence, Manto showed the crucial and savage reality of the society of the subcontinent at the time of partition.

### Discussion and Analysis

At the outset, the study proposes that Manto's short stories are among the few unadulterated glimpses into the underlying misogynistic societal structures of South Asia during the time of the partition of the subcontinent. His writing is straightforward and honest, creating life out of the prostitutes' dens, rapists, murderers, powerful men and powerless

women. He spotlights women caught amidst a highly volatile and inherently sexualized part of the world. In his fictional world, Manto offers a wide variety of life, inherently spoiled and degraded by subscribing to the patriarchal structures.

In this section, the short stories under analysis are the following: 'Colder Than Ice', 'The Return', and 'Mozail'. Regardless of the content, the stories concern the interaction between men and women. Manto presents women who are sexualized, as they try to make their way in the ruthless subcontinent under the control of men, where the societal rules and regulations favour men more than women: men rape and murder, exploit women, and strip them off literally and metaphorically; Manto's stories take place during such crisis of gender inequality.

Feminism engrosses two important aspects of intellectual obligation and political movement that lead to justice for women and end sexism in all forms. Luce Irigaray asserts in the initial sentence of her essay *This Sex Which Is Not One* that female sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters (2). In human history, women's existence is scrutinized through a male point of view, as a result of which women are always judged as secondary. According to Deborah Madsen, feminism deals with women and their status in society and asks questions about oppression, consciousness and gender. Madsen added more to the apprehensions of feminist theory that it is the unique experience of women in history; the notion of female consciousness; the definition of gender that limits and oppresses; and the causes of women's liberation from those restrictions (Madsen 184-212).

Helene Cirxous discussed the element of male influence upon females. In a meeting in *La Revue des sciences humaines*, she discriminated against connecting one terrible and one superior sort of authority. In her words, she elaborated that she would have made a clear difference when it comes to the type of authority that is the will to dominate, the longing for individual and narcissist contentment. That command is always authority over others. By depicting women's power, she meant that it is not a single authority; it is multiplied. For there is more than one, and it is an issue of supremacy over oneself,

in other words, of a relationship not supported on domination save for on accessibility (Cirxous 5-150).

In 'Colder than Ice', Manto spotlights a perfect picture of the immoral values of the subcontinent. Amidst religious, cultural, and spatial conflicts, women become the objects of the indirect means of revenge against the opposite culture. Ishwar Singh seizes a woman of the Muslim community and rapes her. In Nafisa Zargar's point of view, the narrative portrays how women were being abducted and taken anywhere to be destroyed and raped (Zargar 283-85). The guilt-ridden Ishwar comes back to his own house. He appears to have lost all his sexual interest and vigour. He confesses to Kalwant Kaur, his wife, telling her about the savage and inhumane thing he had done to a Muslim girl; he expresses the nature of a man by saying, "What a creature man is!" (Manto 56). In the end, the society fails the silent, raped Muslim girl, whose existence for Ishwar goes only as far as being a medium to central his deep-seated hatred for the Muslim community. To Ishwar Singh, the object that he raped was a "heap of cold flesh" (57).

'Colder than Ice' establishes aggression as the primary response of men in relation to women. Ishwar's unstable life and mental instability find an outlet in the purity of the Muslim girl, and he taints it, giving an outlet to his own aggression.

Similarly, 'Mozail' presents the silence of another woman who is cornered and constantly harassed by Tarlochan. She repeatedly refuses his romantic proposals, judging him to be "incapable of understanding anything subtle!" (Manto 67). As a man, Tarlochan cannot understand Mozail or her plea for space and freedom. Throughout the narrative, she is boxed in, so the patriarchal subject can satisfy his own desire. In a manner much similar to *Colder than Ice*, a central character is an object for the satisfaction of violent and forbidden desires. Throughout the narrative, the shackles of male desires hang over Mozail. Tarlochan compares Mozail and his fiancé, Karpal Kaur with whom he was about to marry, the former being unconventional and the latter being a patriarchal woman. Manto writes, "She was delicate, unlike all village women who had become masculine by working in the fields. Karpal Kaur was all woman, shy and withdrawn" (65).

Karpal is the ideal woman for men that live in Tarlochan's community, unlike Mozail.

As the story progress, Tarclochan's harassment of Mozail continues, being unable to look past his own violent desires, failing to read the "agonized silence of Mozail when she rose to make an acquaintance at the next table" (67). Mozail's refusal to bow down to male authority is something totally unacceptable by patriarchal standards. Tarlochan shaves off his own beard in a desperate move to possess her, even if it meant violating his religious values. Mozail, after seeing Tarlochan's determination to cage her, rejects him again, to which he responds by calling her "vulgar and a heartless girl" (70). The assessment of Tarlochan exposes an important flaw of the patriarchal system. To Tarlochan, Mozail is good as long as she fulfils his desires and submits herself to him completely. As she refuses to do so, she is perceived as 'vulgar' and 'heartless'. Manto highlights the irony of the situation as Tarlochan is himself being heartless by deceiving his betrothal Karpal Kaur and continually harassing Mozail.

Years later, both characters cross paths again, and Tarlochan declares to Mozail that "he has started growing his beard as a revenge from her" (72). Manto cleverly uses this statement as a typical response of a male's aggression when he has failed in his only pursuit, which was to possess a woman. As the story reaches its end, Mozail, despite everything, agrees to go with Tarlochan to save Karpal Kaur from the savage rioters, but he was not willing for a tiny sacrifice to remove his turban, "It's not proper for me to go to Karpal's house without my turban because they think I am a proper Sikh" (73). At such a moment, the real bravery comes from the woman, as she puts her own self on the line. She presents herself as a sacrifice to the savage men to save Karpal Kaur. By giving Karpal her own robes, she indicated that only women could understand another woman's silence; hence they are the only ones who can save each other. Manto indicates the violent, sexually aggressive nature of men, again, that is deaf to the pleas of women to the point of considering them as silent and mute as they keep, "trying to break into the flat, gathered around her in a circle, forgetting what they were here for" (77). Manto shows the male herd lustung to physically violate Karpal Kaur, but since

Mozail presented herself naked, all the savage men began to run after her. When Tarlochan covered her by finally removing his turban, she rejected him by saying, "Take away your rag of religion, I don't need it" (77), offering to sacrifice herself silently, submitting herself to a fate much like the Muslim girl in 'Colder than Ice'.

Lastly, 'The Return' is also a story of horrible incidents faced and endured by a girl at the hands of savage men. The women of the subcontinent were facing one horror after another at the time of partition. This is skillfully depicted in the story 'The Return'. The story is a horrible manifestation of Sakina's silence which was abducted during the migration from one country to another at the time of partition. Several hundred other cases were reported of the same horrible account. What has time and again been forgotten, nevertheless, was the price paid by countless women.

In the story, the father is pleading with the military officers to find his daughter, who was being separated from him during the revolt. It was later being revealed that the rescuers, who were supposed to be the guardians of women and children, turned out to be the most savage of them all. They found Sakina at the side of some road, having already been raped several times by her abductors. Manto writes, "She had confessed that she was Sakina, the daughter of Sirajuddin" (80), but instead of returning her to her grief-stricken father, they kept her for themselves. Alex Tickell, in his article, analyzes the story in simple words, 'An aged, emigrant searches for his daughter, Sakina, in a refugee camp, but when the two are finally reunited in the camp hospital, the daughter he 'finds' is so traumatized after being raped that she cannot speak, and automatically unfastens her clothes in response to the doctor's request that her father 'open up' the window' (Tickell 358).

Feminism has always challenged to sanction a society of women that excels in cultural features and geographic limitations; on the other, nationalism has exaggerated such characteristics and boundaries in order to resist hegemonic occupation. Indian nationalism attempted at domineering female bodies by imprisoning them into stereotypes, where females represented the pre-colonial, the conventional, and

the unscathed domestic spaces. Other than the tale of partition, Manto's writings are marked by strong female characters. He superimposes the brutality of partition with the ideological brutality that sex and sexuality are subjugated to within the social structure of the Indo-Pak Subcontinent ([Ranjan 2018](#)). Similarly, Ishpani is of the view that Manto's female characters are portrayed through their sexual vulnerability, for example, sexual humiliation, rape, prostitution etc. She asserts that "they are always the victims, with the power only to occasion their own destruction" (183-93).

## **Conclusion**

The study, therefore, concludes by stating that the selection of Saadat Hasan Manto's stories illustrates a severe deprivation of rights, liberty, and equality in the subcontinent. Men habitually act as the perpetrators of violence against women, and the societal structure allows them to escape without any consequences while women respond with silence.

The short stories under study specifically use the time period of continental violence to show man's inability to empathize with women while pointing

out the inherent structure that allows gender violence on a large scale. Throughout the selected stories, women are violated by men for them to make a statement of power and domination. In 'Colder than Ice', Ishwar Singh rapes the Muslim girl, and Sakina is repeatedly raped by a variety of men in 'The Return'. Similarly, in 'Mozail', Mozail is forced to strip herself in front of a crowd of people. The issue of gender for Manto, then, becomes a political issue, for it is through the violation of women that men assert their supremacy amidst the disorder of the partition.

Additionally, Manto's stories provide further insight into the ability of women to respond to lawless, masculine barbarity. Sakina resigns herself to the power of men. Her mental torment reaches the point where she unconsciously unfastens her clothes in response to something as simple as 'open up the window'. Mozail's response is a psychological defence of herself as she rejects the protection offered by Tarlochan against a crowd of men ready to rape her. Kalwant Kaur's reaction is the culmination of other short stories as she kills her own husband to avenge the Muslim girl.

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