



Women-as-Prostitute-Paradigm in Manto's Short Stories 'The Insult' and 'Behind the Reeds'

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The *prostitute* remains to be considered. Explicitly condemned by the social order, she is implicitly tolerated. No doubt because the break between usage and exchange is, in her case, less clear-cut? In her case, the qualities of woman's body are "useful." However, these qualities have "value" only because they have already been appropriated by a man, and because they serve as the locus of relations - hidden ones -between men. (LucelIrigaray)

Abstract:

The paper aims at establishing that 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 stories selected for this endeavour are 'The Insult' and 'Behind the Reeds.' What is interesting to read is the initial contrast in the location of the two different women. The author has heavily relied on LucelIrigaray's thesis of 'Woman on the Market' but goes a step further to use the stories as a tool in answering the question that Irigaray leaves unanswered.

Keywords: Prostitute; commodity; exchange; sex/gender; Manto

Introduction

Saadat Hassan Manto was born in Ludhiana in May 1912. It's an interesting fact that Manto, a stalwart in Modern Urdu Literature failed twice in Urdu at matriculation level. Only after a third attempt he was successful and could enroll himself in a college in Amritsar in 1931. There too he failed twice and dropped out. He tried his luck in Aligarh too in 1934 but he had to leave not because of his carelessness but because of a wrong diagnosis for Tuberculosis. Manto moved to Bombay in 1936 and except for a short stint in Delhi between 1941 and 1942 Manto lived in Bombay till 1948, the year he moved to Pakistan as a result of increasing communal tensions, which he knew he would not be able to live with. He was

deeply influenced by the partition of India and the ensuing violence especially that inflicted on women. Men not only fought with men from the other side or of the other religion, but abducted, raped, mutilated, tortured, enslaved women in their ghoulis acts of violence. Manto's depiction of women's suffering transcends situational crises and clears all hazy perceptions of a problematic, otherwise ambiguous. What happened on both the sides of a quickly carved international border is a matter of shame.

While in Bombay Manto faced the realities of a difficult life in his earlier years and soon he was at terms with the underbelly of a modern city that glittered on the surface. His experience with some film magazines and his tryst with the film industry as a script writer brought him not only some quick bucks but also built a background for the characters he created in films and fiction. His job at Filmistan Studio helped him study the opulence of the glitterati and its extremely opposite life of castaways. People from the whole nation rushed to Bombay to try their luck in the celluloid world but only few made it to the screen. A great number of women were brought to Bombay on false promises of stardom and work by people who guised themselves as directors and producers but in reality they were just a part of the growing prostitution industry. By 30s and 40s Bombay was home to men who came to work here to provide for their families back home. Population of Bombay was exploding and thus arose the system of



'Chawls,' an almost makeshift arrangement for living space. Here people, huddled into small living spaces, sometimes ten to twenty people, working in different shifts, lived in a same small room. These set of poorly provided civic amenities came to be known as chawls. Matt Reeck and Aftab Ahmad have given a vivid account of this phenomenon in their introduction to *Bombay Stories*, a translation of Manto's stories written in and about Bombay. Matt Reeck and Aftab Ahmad go on to account for the growing disorder and a flourishing prostitution industry, and they allude to poverty and destitution for the growing number of prostitutes, while I will try to stay on the other side of the story, the need, if at all, of men for creating these women on sale. There is another issue that pops up simultaneously with these and that is the larger issue of subduing the other sex even in the confines of the household. The verb 'subdue' is only a miniscule of a set of kinds of infliction and there are more fundamental issues like sex and gender.

It thus becomes urgent to deliberate on the issues of sex and gender, which is the axis on which these stories by Manto that I have chosen for study, revolve. It is a world where women are turned into commodities to be consumed by ruthless men, almost always due to men's oppressive relegation of their gendered other. Manto never misses a chance to come down heavily on the biased progenitors of the society who make women live and suffer in a viciously vindictive society. This suffering is located in the patriarchal nature of society. For this it is important to appreciate larger issues of politics, sex and gender.

Gender Studies has a formidable following in unrelenting legion of feminists from whom I would generously draw support for my argument. For example Simone de Beauvoir's statement that "one is not born, but, rather, becomes woman,"¹ has been a serious matter of debate and it is understood that while sex is an anatomical distinction

gender is a social construct. Although it is said that "The sex/gender system must be reorganized through political action," (Rubin 61) and I don't deny it a possible course, I am interested in the social and the psychological of the problematic. It is, though, an extremely difficult task to alienate the issue from the political and moreover in the light of the fact that a political explanation of the issue of sex and gender is the politicization of a social disorder, where I won't call it a psychological anomaly. It may be in future accepted that gender is perhaps a psychological anomaly but that is still fantastic.

It "is an historical situation rather than a natural fact" as Judith Butler says. Discourses in feminism in recent years have more or less come up with intercosmic spaces that adjust an in-betweenness of varied theories appropriating issues of sex and gender and for this reason different approaches do not melt into one body of evidence but hang in tandem as a metalanguage of feminism. I say 'metalanguage' because the very word 'woman' has been in question and has been losing the usual stability faster than ever, perhaps because of ever increasing discourse on feminism. The distance between the notion of sex and gender is a matter of five thousand years of trans-formation leave apart the queer. It turns out then that though it calls for some debate, a certain assumption on the part of a theorist looking into the matter at the same time as being the part of the same matter, becomes a futile exercise, perhaps sometimes leading to what can be called 'Gender Trouble.'² Thus when the signified 'woman' is used in feminist or critical discourses, it dovetails concepts ranging from race, ethnicity, sex, polity, etc. to cultural anthropology and poststructuralist determiners of oppression against women. Well that again yields to the thought if women are women because they are oppressed? Imagine women doing what men can, wearing what men do, behaving the



way men do, be self-reliant if men are, and by the time this sentence ends, there is a heightened sense of relief in the useless nature of any argument against men.

Com-modification of the 'Sublime Object' in 'The Insult.'

Women have been the greatest discovery of man-kind for almost all practical purposes. I would reserve my opinion about human civilization here, taking advantage of the situation that it is not needed of me to comment on that in the present endeavor, mankind has come far into history's progress towards the infamous end. During this journey men have improved on their sophistication with which they have employed all the resources that nature has bestowed upon them, women being the one with the maximum number of possibilities in their use and therefore abuse. As Gayle Rubin says "Sex/gender systems are not ahistorical emanations of the human mind; they are products of historical human activity," (*Deviations*: 61) man-kind has twisted and turned the commodified 'other' of its species to sundry purposes.³ This is what we observe in 'The Insult.' 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." (Manto: 48) Here Ram Lal is talking to Saugandhi, the chief character of the story. Perhaps she reminds me of Nora Helmer of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. She doesn't even realize her true plight and she is, on the surface, happily wedded to her circumstances. Saugandhi plays the wise duck. She knows not that she knows not what bigger forces of the urban chaos and freakish foul makes women the agents of harlotry.

In the beginning of the story the reader doesn't expect such a hard recoil of the story's end, but before that end Manto

weaves a picturesque fabric of a whore's world. Saugandhi had spent her last five years serving the city's 'gentlemen' and rogues equitably. She rather takes pride in the fact that she knows them inside out and the art to deal with them, something that proves to be her fatal error if we stretch her to tragic proportions, which at the moment is not required. Only the fact that she is oppressed doesn't qualify her to be tragic on the other hand. Although to talk of the 'oppressor/oppressed' paradigm it is evident that one has to clarify the point of view to progress on. It is therefore difficult to side with either those who advocate legislative rights and better working condition for the 'sex-workers' and those who are abolitionists, who claim that sheer presence of such a concept is a patriarchal device to perpetuate trafficking of women. Perhaps both the views are correct and this sort of ambivalence on the part of a critic is slightly visible in Manto's portrayal of Saugandhi's predicament in 'The Insult.' Although, after reading 'The Insult' and 'Behind the Reeds,' or for that matter Manto's other stories with prostitutes as their chief characters, one may be inspired to question the authoritative intent of a man who claims the insight into sexual affinities and sexual behavior of women. Luce Irigaray's explication of the commercial enterprise of men for what Rubin calls the "The Traffic in Women,"⁴ on the one hand deconstructs the psychoanalytic of gender formation and on the other exposes the fundamental limitations of Freudian method when she says "The fact that Freud himself is enmeshed in a power structure and an ideology of the patriarchal type leads, moreover, to some internal contradictions in his theory." (70) Even Freud stands tried.

Perhaps Madho, who plays the robbing-hood part in the story, catches a glimpse of the insult Saugandhi had to bear two hours before he sneaks into her room. One can read overarching patriarchal intrusion into a woman's private life every second line in the story, although the setting of the story is the



least ideal for reading between lines for such a cause. The insult that Saugandhi faces happens almost in the middle of the story and the story would have ended in Saugandhi insulting Madho as a vengeance that she could not unleash on the so called gentleman who uttered “Yuhkk” to see her, had she caught him when she came to terms with what had happened. Manto vividly gives us details of her insurmountable anger on being spurned by the 'gentleman.' The word 'yuhkk' and the suddenness of the man's departure as a refusal to buy her that night shattered the façade of her comfortable life with which she had already made a compromise. Her complacency is stripped down to a whatever little concrete self is left over. She seems to rake in a sort of melting pot, alchemized, transformed and detached from the camouflage built over years. A moment's crisis knocks her 'current price' down to zero, what Irigaray calls the 'exchange' value in terms of "gold, or phalluses." (175).

What follows in the story after the man's rejection of Saugandhi is a Shakespearean portrayal of internal suffering on the one hand and a reviling repugnance like that of Sylvia Plath in some of her poems, on the other. In her thoughts she says "I didn't dress up for that pig! Its my habit-not just mine but everyone's. But at two in the morning, and Ram Lal, and this market, and the car and the flashlight!" Her consciousness is in a state of flux, inexplicably decimated. She can feel the excruciating pain for which she used some balm on her forehead, but at the same time she is benumbed on the pulses, although she wishes that the pain engulfed her body, so that she can escape thinking of what had befallen her. She goes on to figure out what yuhkk meant:

- 1) 'What a joke! This girl's so ugly even her mother can't bear looking at her.'
- 2) 'I wouldn't let this bitch shine my shoes.'

3) 'Ram Lal, where did you unearth this specimen?'

4) 'Ram Lal, you went out of your way to praise this girl? Ten rupees for this? A cow's asshole would be better.'
(Manto 59)

She wants to redo whatever happened to her as in film-making and thinks how she could tear the man's cheeks with her long fingernails. She is so infuriated that she can hear a car's engine roar now and then. She thinks about her past and present. She thinks of her figure, and she knows that she has got "all the bodily attributes that men want in a woman." She also recollects all the good deeds she had done and how kind and large hearted she had been, but all in vain. She doesn't realize that after all she is selling herself as a commodity to which the buyer had the right to refuse. She also doesn't realize that she cannot expect people to behave the way she does. In her stream of burning thoughts she forgets that she is only a commodity in a by and large masculine world where "Man endows the commodities he produces with a narcissism that blurs the seriousness of utility, of use. Desire, as soon as there is exchange, "perverts" need." (Irigaray 177) The night grows impatient with her but she reassures herself that as time would pass, she would forget it all. She starts back for her apartment but those thoughts again haunt her and what she further says to herself is a remarkable example of 'value added service' that Madhois offered and perhaps three other were the beneficiaries. About this man who insulted her she thinks and says "Or tearing off my clothes right in front of him, I would ask, "This is what you came for, right? Here, take it for free — take it. But not even your father could buy what I've inside me!" And this last sentence is the remarkable example of the 'value added service' that I mentioned above but only in terms of her view, a view that is an illusion. She thinks she has something in her control, and perhaps this is the crux of the story, the source of her being, the source of her complacency and the



monotony of her life, the very lack of knowledge that "*Neither as mother nor as virgin nor as prostitute has woman any right to her own pleasure.*" (Irigaray 187) And what happened next is only a temporary restoration of any ability to act on her own. Her misplaced nemesis on Madho is her delusion. A reader can feel a sense of poetic justice in her actions, her verbal salvo on Madho and his escape from her room. After all she sleeps with her mangy dog and a lack of man near her is not a sign of emancipation, it is an act in futility.

'Behind the Reeds': A Woman not "removed from exchange among men"

Manto's Story 'Behind the Reeds' offers a stark universe, a singularity of existence, collapsed into itself, shut out from time and space. Luce Irigaray in the chapter 'Women on the Market' in *This Sex Which is Not One* considers the three most broadly categorized roles of women. Woman as virgin, woman as mother and woman as the prostitute. In Manto's story it is the last that is considered. Although the main character whose name is Nawab lives with an elderly woman who, Manto says, could be her mother. In the very first place we are somewhat shocked to see that a mother could condemn her daughter to sex-trade but this elderly woman too could have been a prostitute in her youth and perhaps Nawab was an offspring of her past. This elderly woman who Manto calls Sardar is the one who is responsible for relegating her to prostitution. There are a number of questions that might arise for us to know, specifically in terms of the story's background and generally in terms of prostitution as a part of the society built by and for men. Luce Irigaray's treatment of sexuality and commodification of women for exchange is remarkable and comes to rescue in the explication of the phenomenon. She says:

The virginal woman, on the other hand, is pure exchange value. She is nothing but the possibility, the place,

the sign of relations among men. In and of herself, she does not exist: she is a simple envelope veiling what is really at stake in social exchange. In this sense, her natural body disappears into its representative function. *Red blood* remains on the mother's side, but it has no price, as such, in the social order; woman, for her part, as medium of exchange, is no longer anything but *semblance*. The ritualized passage from woman to mother is accomplished by *the violation of an envelope*: the hymen, which has taken on the value of *taboo*, the taboo of virginity. Once deflowered, woman is relegated to the status of use value, to her entrapment in private property; she is removed from exchange among men. (186)

The idea of women as commodities for exchange calls for multifarious approaches toward its explication, of which psychoanalytic and ideological approaches are, to a great extent, my present concern, though Marxian treatment and therefore ideological approach to the problem can also be the mode of inquiry. Although any explication on women's suffering or for that matter mere mention of any facet of feminist pursuits, are fraught with the imminent danger of internal contradictions and the whole issue of anchoring the methodology to a particular school of thought becomes increasingly moot. Amid such threats searching for the political in the realm of gender and its problematic is an enterprise rather dangerous. What comes to the fore in debating over such issues is the demarcation or definition of territorial understanding, of where to begin with and what not to touch, or if at all there should exist such values, although open to further scrutiny. The psychoanalytical treatment of the 'sex/gender system' opens opportunities of overlapping with the political. I call it 'opportunity' because on the one hand it lends a range of possibilities for explanation



and on the other it opens a floodgate of issues that surround the very many problematics to inquire into, all that are chiefly related to the 'sex/gender system.'

And although it may appear a little trivial, an interpolation, where I remember how I learnt about Buddhist tenets in high school that there is suffering in this world, the suffering has some cause and the cause is desire. So this facet of ideology or what Slavoj Zizek calls "The Sublime Object of Ideology" has a "secret." The secret can be read as desire on the one hand and symptomatic pathology on the other giving rise to Zizek's "The Social Symptom." (21)

While explicating the 'symptoms' of an ill bred malaise, the commodifying of the 'female' of the species takes effect, it draws in the contention Zizek tried and to a great extent, was successful in demonstrating how the 'secret' behind any form whether it is a commodity or dreams is more crucial, that the content is not important in theorizing for the form. The secret is the value hidden in unequal desires between men, the very foundation of classical political economy, "an accidental interplay between supply and demand."

In 'Behind the Reeds' we have, in all three women and only one man as the decisive forces behind the economics of exchange. Although there are other men who come and go and who play the necessary role in the exposition of the rising action in the story, it is ironical that Nawab meets her fate in a villainous act of another woman who could have stopped being exchanged among men had she not given in to her biological needs outside the social norm. And there is another facet that interests me here in the story and that is the similarity of polyandry and polygyny in terms of cause and effect of the untoward end of the story. And I will come back to this point after I make a point on the desire of the other most important character in the story, Haibat Khan. He had already possessed a woman outside the acceptable

fabric of society. And though it was Shahina who calls herself 'Halakat,' which means death in urdu, who made it possible for Haibat Khan to trespass the norms of society, to be in adulterous relation with the widow of his friend, it is Haibat who perpetrates the sin in being connected to at least two women at a time and both located in the realms of commodified otherness. Haibat Khan does not follow the route of social exchange and pounces on his object of desire without following men's arrangement of exchange of women among them in the socially acceptable sense. The 'exchange of women' then becomes a necessary evil for men. Irigaray says that "Without the exchange of women, we are told, we would fall back into the anarchy (?) of the natural world, the randomness (?) of the animal kingdom." (170) She insists that men circulate women among themselves "according to a rule known as the incest taboo." She adds:

The possession of a woman is certainly indispensable to man for the reproductive use value that she represents; but what he desires is to have them all. To "accumulate" them, to be able to count off his conquests, seductions, possessions, both sequentially and cumulatively, as measure or standard(s). (174)

Here it is apt to note that it is not only Haibat Khan who is part of Nawab's clients, but he is the one who violates the sinful order of her life. And therefore it is important to look into those specific circumstances that set Nawab apart from a common sex-worker. Gayle Rubin in *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* suggests how Claude Levi Strauss and Sigmund Freud have worked upon the problematic of domestication of women but she also says that they have not been able to realize the lack of "critical glance." (34) Manto eyes her character with this critical glance and reads the inevitability of Nawab's



commodification. Although Shahina plays the hoodwinking blimp wrapped in six yards of fabric and almost in charge of the commercial enterprise 'behind the reeds,' she cannot escape her destiny. For some time she becomes the (ideal?) of Irigaray's stock exchange, but for some time. And there lies Manto's attempt to breakdown the common order of 'exchange.' And it is usual of Manto to introduce an element of surprise, a thrill in the final events of his stories, which he places subtly by making Shahina fiendish in her act, almost ghoulish. She cuts down Nawab to pieces and invites Haibat Khan to see her in a willful act of perdition. Haibat Khan faints to see what is beneath the sheet with which Shahina veils Nawab as if she were a bride, perhaps to mock her lack of virginity.

Conclusion

'Behind the Reeds' is set in more or less a Beckettian world, where Nawab acts like the woman in *Happy Days* who is stuck in an earth mound upto her waste and can only move her hands though she exercises more influence on her circumstances than . 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. She is alienated from the rest of the world in a way that could be called a blessing in disguise, as the rest of the world is equally maleficent toward women who know their plight and live it. 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.

Manto, sophisticatedly, pushes the idea of woman as prostitute in the readers mind for him to reevaluate his position as the 'labour

force' in reproducing the 'object.' The reader comes to terms with the uses and misuses of the exchange function in a largely, or let's say completely, masculine order where there are layers and layers of appropriation of the feminine. Gayle Rubin says:

If it is women who are being transacted, then it is the men who give and take them who are linked, the women being a conduit of a relationship rather than a partner to it. The exchange of women does not necessarily imply that women are objectified, in the modern sense, since objects in the primitive world are imbued with highly personal qualities. But it does imply a distinction between gift and giver. If women are the gifts, then it is men who are the exchange partners. And it is the partners, not the presents, upon whom reciprocal exchange confers its quasi-mystical power of social linkage. The relations of such a system are such that women are in no position to realize the benefits of their own circulation. (Deviations: 44)

Whether it is Saugandhi or Nawab, it is the masculine world that plays the decisive role in the construction of a social order where women/object is given value through exchange and transactions. Whether this woman/object/commodity is a prostitute or a mother it is the sustenance of an erroneous social order and prostitution, once superimposed on the feminine, prevents this order from crumbling down. Prostitution due to "barter, promiscuity and emotional indifference," thus, maintains a necessary supply and demand between the labor-capital units and the customer-king force, while the traffic on the moral side goes on, although there too there is exchange but at a point it stops. Whereas the women as prostitute are not excluded from exchange like the 'mother' because her "responsibility is to maintain the social order. Mothers are essential to its (re)production (...through maternity, child rearing and domestic



maintenance in general.) Their responsibility is to maintain the social order without intervening so as to change it. Their products are legal tender in that order..." (Irigaray 185) Here Irigaray, at last, questions as to "What modifications would it undergo

if women left behind their condition as commodities subject to being produced, consumed, valorized, circulated, and so on, by men alone and took part in elaborating and outexchanges?" (191) She doesn't really answer that question and perhaps that is a difficult question and to me class-struggle is the only answer, although without the possibility of one overthrowing the other.

Notes

1. This comes from the translation of the *The Second Sex* by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier where the word 'a' before 'woman' has been omitted by the translators, and the earlier translation by H. M. Parshley of that of 1953 has it. All the references to the book are that of Sheila and Malovany-Chevallier's translation.
2. *Gender Trouble* is the seminal work of Judith Butler where she has...
3. Gayle Rubin defines 'sex/gender system' as "the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied."
4. The name of a chapter in Rubin's book.

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