

# MANTO : AN ALTER EGO OF THE SUBALTERN

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## ABSTRACT

*Can the Subaltern speak?<sup>1</sup> –this phrase itself questions the marginalised sections who have been demoted to the periphery of the society and fails to have their voices heard. The subaltern segment has been silenced since ages, and the mainstream have reached inside their soul and turned down the dial on self confidence. The entire sect has been denied of the hegemonic power. For the women, it is way more difficult because both colonialism and patriarchy makes sure that she remains suppressed, and this structure prevents her from speaking. Manto is a celebrated story teller. He is a writer of new locale. One of the common specialties of the new milieu's literature is that it is diasporic in nature which deals with race relations and a strong urge for re-identification. This dislodgment is a very unkind realism and authenticity of the new habitat, which is the fate of millions of the people in India and its subcontinent. Manto was independent, rebellious and had the weird interest in ripping down the façade that the phallogocentric society wore, and he was guileless in his approach in doing so. He was not scared of exposing the blatant truth which wafts around the partition times about the people, who lounge around the edges of the marginalised circle such as the daily wage labourers, whores, wagers, pimps, thugs and intoxicated souls. He has, unambiguously, demonstrated the repulsive and vile side of the treatment met out to these women in, rather glorifying them.*

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Manto has successfully emerged as the campaigner to support these women who had faced severe mental and physical brutal blows during the times of partition. He spearheaded the entire move violently by exposing the truth, so that, these unheard voices could reach every nook and corner of the world, so that, they could achieve a dignified status for themselves. Spivak puts forward the notion that there is always a gap that exists between the reader/audience and the subaltern, but Manto disapproves this entirely and dispels the darkness cast over this and identifies every detail in truth, so that, the analysis of the gap could be made, and also, the misconception of the idea of misrepresentation could be avoided. The sufferings and the emotional and physical anguish which were meted out to women was enough to throw them on the sidelines of the mainstream society, thus, throttling them and making their voices unheard. Like a true feminist, his voice reaches every nook and crevice of the soul of the audience, where, he pleads for the tattered and the bashed women characters. Somdev Banik<sup>2</sup>, a renowned literary figure put forward the point that subalterns should not be considered only to the particular era of postcolonial period. They could not be figured out as a specific sect limited to a particular region or language. Their appearance could be witnessed in vernacular literature of the Indian sub-continent with numerous characters having a marginalised set up.

To Manto, it appears repulsive that it is not only the physical woman, who is denied the powers of speaking, but, her emotional wounds and scars which gapes at her also appears so. He is seen becoming one with the character he sketches. The voices that emerge out of the characters are none other, than, his own. He shares their suffering, trauma, torture meted out to them in detail. His stories are occupied by the marginalised, whether this marginalisation is in terms of gender, money, stature or any other variable denoting the twofold conflict of the tyrant and the browbeaten. He definitely did not highlight the agony of these marginalised with the tenacity just to talk about their sufferings, but he had deep compassion for them and he wanted these beaten and bruised characters to

rise and shine through his stories, so that the entire universe could envisage a simplified interest and empathy for the same.

'Mummy', by Manto reveals the insincere societal attitude on women and their cravings in seeking the human self-esteem and decorum. Manto wrote this story in the first person and used his own name, Manto, throughout the story. In the story, the character, Manto and his wife went for vacationing in Poona. It happened there, he met his friend Chadda. Chadda introduced Manto to a widow, Stella Jackson, who was famously called as Mummy, and, who was very social, and had many people visiting them. All the men who assemble there each evening are Indian, from north and south, and devotedly, varied. All are connected to Poona's film industry – they either work in it or aspire to do so - actors, writers, film directors and music directors. She cared a lot for all the people visiting her, and they also have been living with her in the same quarters. When Manto first had an encounter with her, he was not very contented because of her wilted face and gaudy makeup, but soon realised that she was not like other woman, but was authentic and a liberal lady, who though being a mediator would not even let any man take unnecessary advantage of her girls. She did not let her favourite son make Phyllis his prey as Phyllis was very young to be taken. There was a tussle between her and Chadda, which resulted in a way that he was made to leave the place. But again, when Chadda fell sick, she brought him back to take special care of him and brought him back to life. She, like a mother saved the life of a fifteen year old from getting debased early in her age. It highlighted the very humanitarian edge that she had within her.

Chadda, Ranjeet Kumar, Gharib Nawaz, Venkutrey and many others, who frequently came to her house, were treated like her adopted children. She was vigilant, vigorous and conscientious, she had a complete grasp on each one of them and restricted them, while they were in a drunken state; they were not allowed to take lead of her young girls. She did not think twice before slapping her favourite son, Chadda, when he tried to get at one of her young girls, Phyllis, a fifteen-year-old young girl:

“Chadda pulled Phyllis towards him, squeezed her against his chest in a passionate B-grade movie embrace. ‘Chadda, leave her alone. For God’s sake let her go,’ Mummy screamed, but he paid no attention to her. Then it happened. She slapped him across the face. ‘Get out, get out!’ She shouted.”<sup>3</sup>

Later, Chadda had repented for his roguish act, he appreciated Mummy for stopping him from barbaric act which he was about to conduct. Later on in this story, we find that mummy was forced to leave Poona, and she came across a pimp, who ran an informal bordello. Manto's wife in the story symbolized the voice of the society and fixed Mummy into the Anglo-Indian prostitute position, for running an illegal brothel in a respected, refined and cultured society. In the end of the story, Manto made Chadda pander to highlighting the humane ideas that Mummy propagated through her gestures.

Mummy, as a kind of a cocotte is a stranger of society, who has no place in a cultured and refined structure. Though, she was a kind and liberal woman, but, the society can never endow her with the sash of gallantry and loyalty. He symbolized the duplicitous social attitudes on women in the story. By the end of the story, Manto goes ahead of the hackneyed character portrayal to look at the person within. To him, it is no longer an imperative view whether Mummy was a procuress or not, she may be or may not be. In fact, the story ends with a poignant drama, with Mummy leaving Poona because police had asked her to serve as the procuress for them to which Mummy had out rightly denied. When they failed to influence her, they raised illegal case of moral depravity against her for running a brothel.

Manto has always united himself with the subaltern figures. He, empowered his fallen women characters in his stories and showed that no one can take them for granted. The society castigates them, and delineates them according to the truisms of patriarchy. These marginalised women with their muteness are victims of domination and exploitation, and always are the other or the fallen of the society. A woman requires an immense daring and effort to overcome the moral obligations of society. She is inured to be moral and good because these are measured normative principles. One who tries to contravene the limits of conventional cultural conjectures is termed an aberrant woman. So, it is only under acute conditions, when she is in jeopardy wrenching in pain of hunger and starvation, she chooses to sell herself. She obtains the status of a prostitute and in return fills her stomach and the

ones, who are inclined to her as well. Principles, ethics and values then occupy a minor position in this negotiation or trade of flesh and succeeding nourishment of life. As stated by Frances B. O'Connor in *The Female Face in Patriarchy: Oppression as Culture*, a good woman according to patriarchal standards must "smile, acquiesce, avoid questioning male authority or pronouncements, and be grateful for any minor ministry. In other words, by not occupying any space, by remaining invisible, women participate in their own erasure."<sup>4</sup>

So, in a patriarchy, a woman is either marginalised or erased. Either way, they are demoted. The marginalised with their subaltern voices are not only restricted to the prostitutes, they are one of the many. An appropriate observation by Sumanta Banerjee regarding the social status of the prostitutes:

"... like other wage workers ... the prostitute also is pushed into a strictly defined narrow space. She is condemned to the exclusive role of a specialist in sexual entertainment. Stripped of all emotional and intellectual attributes, she becomes the female body ... an input required at one level of the production process in a capitalist society. Reduced to a source of purely utilitarian needs, her body is expected to produce the regular nocturnal fantasy of pleasure she represents the ultimate in alienation ..."<sup>5</sup>

In the short story, 'Ten Rupees', Manto portrays the story of an unblemished youthful young girl who is thrown away into the dark dungeons of flesh trade. The story is set in a 'chawl' (a big building with many floors and small rooms) set in Bombay. Sarita is a young girl who is at the age of playing dolls with other children living in chawl. She represents how a mother coerces her daughter into occupation of prostitution and pretended as her daughter is innocent:

"Almost everyone in the building knew that Sarita's mother was forcing her young daughter to be a prostitute, but because they weren't in the habit of concerning themselves with others, no one ever contradicted Sarita's mother when she would lie about how innocent her daughter was."<sup>6</sup>

Manto portrays that time when people were in precariously stuck and bartered their possessions i.e. girls and sisters or those young ladies to male clients to gain something in return. Manto describes the picture of child prostitute where her pimp is her own mother who is forced to travel this way due to poverty. She behaves like a professional to her own daughter and teaches her the techniques of the trade. The adolescent prostitute, Sarita is unaware of her state of dealings. Being naïve, she was totally oblivious of her future and cherished the momentary pleasure of getting food and travel in cars. Kishori, the agent and her mother thrust her in this profession and made her a sufferer of sexploitation. Devender Issar writes in favour of Manto in the following way:

"While Manto never pretends to be a philosopher, he is concerned with questions of existence and the self, sin and evil, nature and culture. His preoccupations are always, with the social and cultural man and not with man's essential culture. He, thus simply accepts sex as one of the basic and instinctual aspects of human existence."<sup>7</sup>

Like other adolescent girls, Sarita also had dreams and desires to fulfill, she also wanted to sing songs like Devika Rani to please her clients. She often tried to sing before her patrons, but they pay no regard towards her inborn latent talent. They only hungered to fulfilling of their desires in lieu of a ten rupee note which was a flat rate of her naive and fragile body. The guiltless soul inside her body always cried for receiving such approval from her customers. Manto in this story traverses the self-esteem of the prostitutes. Sarita, suddenly, becomes a flapping bird hopping between the front and back seats of the car. Her joy knew no bounds. She eased the men of their pent-up tautness, but more remarkably, of their perversion. They revel with her in song, completely oblivious to the bartered element

of their relationship. This is easily the most appealing part of a story that could well have been a hackneyed, dark narrative. Sarita's loyalty got reflected, when she returns the ten rupees back to her customer because she felt it was immoral on her part to receive money without discharging her duty sincerely. An acclaimed Urdu writer Najma Manzoor in her essay entitled *Manto, Aurat Aur Waris Alvi* states:

“He (Manto) raised the character of a prostitute...and familiarizes the reader with the humanity of women. His portrayals of domesticated women and prostitutes are unique for he associates unconventional attributes – for example, determination, will, not being content in every situation and above all the ability to laugh. But Manto also showed ‘real’ men who were unconventional and sensitive....and for this reason, readers consider him to be a mature feminist.”<sup>8</sup>

The trip ends with the girl turning the tables on these three friends in a most astonishing way and Manto shows the dissent of a young girl against her mistreatment. The story reveals soulful transformation of a prostitute's life. Manto creates characters that are defiant, rebellious and create a story of their own and cannot comply with the myth of womanly domesticity. Taslima Nasreen in her work, *No Country For Woman* puts forward that woman can do what man can do. She worries that man's description of woman has enraged her. She writes:

“We can surely hope for more Mahashwetas, more Medhas! Woman does have the talent (*medha*) to be a Medha. Woman does have the compassion (*mamata*) to be a Mamata. She has the power to be a Mahashweta. Then why woman should lag behind, why should she remain a housewife? Why she sits content as a mere mother! Why does she remain lifeless, dumb, listless, lusterless, dull, insensate, weak, indifferent, silent and banned! Woman does know how to be a raging fire. Then why does she not start a fire! A fire in which every single discrimination in society may burn to ashes!”<sup>9</sup>

Manto's concern lies with the subaltern characters and he is less focused with making the readers getting appealed to his works, rather he believes in the sequential development of stories where the characters grow within the readers and they themselves are able to open their third eye to make a logical and a reasonable judgments for the same. To simplify, the subaltern here are not partially restricted to simply those who are non-westerners; the subaltern can refer to any limb of the society that is generally marginalised and thus distorted because they do not have the power to stand for themselves, in comparison to the context of the writer on behalf of them and any dispensation that writer may have over them in conditions of race, class, or gender.

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