



Manto as the spokesperson of the Subalternised: a Feminist reading of selected short stories of Manto (English translation)

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ABSTRACT:- The condition of women at the time of Partition was equivalent to that of objects of possession and commodities which belong to their male counterparts. Saadat Hasan Manto through the medium of his short stories he plays the role of a spokesperson for the women who were victimised at the time of Partition on a large scale. Through Spivak's feminism I will try to throw light upon the silence of these women and their inability to speak, it was not as if they could not speak but the aspect of silence which I will discuss in this paper is the freedom to express and oppose. These women were permitted to stay silent and were denied speech just like the prophet in Eliot's 'Wasteland'. Therefore the unspoken pain and misery of these women is brought to forth by Manto in his short stories hence making him feature on the priority list of feminist readers of the century. In this paper I will try to touch upon the aspects of Partition which affected women sufferers in the most adverse ways. I have treated up 'Bismillah', 'Sharifan', 'Khol Do', 'The Hundered Candle Power Bulb', short stories by Manto as my primary text. I aim at establishing Manto as the spokesperson of the subalternised female victims of Partition.

Keywords:-

1. **Subaltern-** it is the group socially, politically, geographically outside the hegemonic power structure of the colony and of their colonial homeland
2. **Feminism-** it is a collection of movements and ideologies aimed at defining, establishing and defending equal political, economic, social rights for women
3. **Community-** a usually small social unit which shares common values
4. **Economic depression-** a depression is a sustained long- term downturn in economic activity
5. **Colonialism-** establishment, exploitation, maintenance, acquisition and expansion of colonies in a territory by foreign ruling power

As Gayatri Spivak defines Subaltern in her essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' as someone who has been suppressed and silenced for ages and he is not given the right to present himself or his identity before the world on his own, but he is always spoken for. In this process of being spoken for the person is misrepresented and is not understood for his true self, his abilities are hidden and more often his disabilities which he might or might not have are brought to light by the representative. This representative may be anyone; the role of the oppressor is always played by someone who is strong either politically or physiologically. The concept of Subalternising and it may be applied in accordance with the context the discussion is held. Basically, Spivak has discussed the Subalternisation of the suppressed classes of society and women as these were the two classes that were not allowed to speak for themselves and they were always spoken for, which misrepresented them and hence worsened their condition in the society. In the context of the Subalternising of the Third World Colonialism and oppression of women are discussed majorly and as Indian society was subjected to both the situations it makes it suitable for discussion in this paper.

Saadat Hasan Manto is celebrated as the master story teller of the century and his short stories are called masterpieces because of the truth that they unravel in so many layers and compel the reader to pick them up repeatedly for deep perusal and every time provide the reader with a new insight. His stories majorly based on the theme of Partition of the Indian subcontinent and the repercussions that people had to suffer due to it seems to be full of truth, the truth of which Manto sang was so dark that it appeared obscene to the spokesmen of society and they accused him of obscenity and tried him in court three times. It is not as if Manto had taken up people from only the mainstream of society but has also presented people from different walks of life and has

spoken on behalf of them as these people could not speak for themselves. Manto has wrote stories about women in which instead of romanticising the beauty of women he has described the cruel and brutal blows of circumstances badgering the beauty of these women and converting them into ugly. He seldom writes of women with exceptional beauty but he constantly describes the natural and essential beauty of a woman given by nature with a microscopic lens and when he tells the story of these women he speaks with a Feminist microphone in his hand. Manto it seems to have had taken upon the responsibility of speaking for the women who were on the largest scale victimised during the time of Partition. While Spivak talks of a misrepresentation taking place during the intervention of a spokesperson between the audience/ reader and the Subaltern, Manto seems to be changing this notion full three hundred and sixty degrees because as closely Manto had observed and studied Partition and had written with such truth and detail that it becomes difficult for a reader to call it a misrepresentation. He shares the grief of a woman suffering from the trauma of abduction, rape and forced prostitution in the form of one of the male characters in the story or sometimes he features himself in the story under the name of Saadat Hasan Manto himself. He became Saeed in his short story 'Bismillah', he became Quasim in the story 'Sharifan', and he also becomes Sirajuddin in the short story 'Khol Do' as a father who is overjoyed on finding his daughter alive and ignoring the fact of her being a victim of rape. Manto through his short stories crosses over from the past and restrains from getting into the future as the time span or the expanse of a short story can only be kept limited. He seldom describes the past of a particular character and when he does he does it in a brief manner and often through the thoughts of another character or as is done traditionally-through the narrator. In Manto's short stories pertaining to the period of and after Partition, the gender ceases to conform to the physiological aspects, for instance in his short story 'Naked Voices' feminine qualities are forced upon Bholu by perceptions of his wife towards his sexuality. For men it has always been a symbol of impotency to be attributed with any sort of feminine quality or characteristic because of the stereotypical mindsets and conditioning that is given to an individual since childhood. Here I use the word 'individual' so as not to refer to any particular gender and sex but to every individual who considers himself or herself as the part of the society. In his short story 'By the Road Side' Manto features his concern for an old and helpless woman who had lost her beautiful daughter at the time of the Partition riots. The tenderness with which the narrator feels for the old woman in the story gives a feminine touch to the narrator's voice and the intensity with which he tries to make the woman believe that her daughter must have died in the riots give him masculinity.

The women in Manto's stories were Subalternised doubly, firstly by the patriarchy due to which they were treated as objects of possession and these objects were at the time of Partition looted and plundered by the men of the other communities to concretise their revenge on the first community. Secondly these women were under colonialism and hence had to depend on their male counterparts in everything that they did. These women, because they did not belong to the elite class of the colonised India or were not in any way related to the British officers of the colonised India they had to suffer hardships unimaginable. In the short story 'Khol Do' Sirajuddin loses her daughter in the crowd at the railway station and he hopes that the volunteers working with the rehabilitation committee will help him. The volunteers (some young men) assure him that they will find his daughter and bring her back to him, and when they do find Sakina (Sirajuddin's daughter) they keep her for their own amusement and pleasure. These volunteers did not abduct Sakina or forced her to go with them, but they comforted her first reassured her that they were taking her to Sirajuddin. This tricking of Sakina by volunteers compels a reader to think about the integrity of those young men who were doing a volunteer work which was meant for the welfare of refugees. This also triggers a reader into thinking about the situation of a woman in society. Just because a woman is found alone and without any male guidance or protection or maybe belonging to a weak and old father she becomes fit to be taken by anyone who finds her first. I have made use of the word 'belong' here because women have always been seen as belonging to someone because of the stereotype and social conditioning that has continued in society for time immemorial. In this story Manto features in two characters, first in that of Sirajuddin's with the qualities and concern for his daughter and secondly in the character of the doctor who is drenched from head to toe in sweat when Sakina unties her salwar and slips it to her feet mechanically when the doctor commands Sirajuddin to open the window. The narrator of the story seems to be having a satirical undertone in his voice when he is narrating the sotry, he seems to be commenting upon the young men and seems to be angry towards them as it was because of them sakina had become a "corpse" if I put it in Manto's words.

In his short story 'Bismillah' the girl Bismillah also is shown as being commodified by Zaheer who happens to be a respected name in the society. Saeed, a friend of Zaheer features characteristics of Manto, as he fathomed the sadness and grief that he found in the eyes of Bismillah. Manto sketches a deep connection between Bismillah and Saeed and also depicts that Bismillah desires to tell Saeed about herself and her condition but could not, Saeed also is depicted as identifying pain and sadness in her eyes on one plain but he was unable to fathom it to its root. The absence of description of how Zaheer met Bismillah and exactly what situation was there in their relationship created an environment of suspense in the story and keeps the reader

questioning and struggling for that which he can feel is there but cannot identify it. But as the genre of short stories take the readers to climax and end quickly the reader through a quick end comes to know of the truth which shocks him/her. In the end of the story it is revealed that Bismillah was a Hindu girl who got left behind during Partition and Zaheer pushed her into prostitution. The absence of the description of Zaheer pushing Bismillah in prostitution and creation of a horrifying and pathetic environment surprises the reader because this breaks the convention of the negative description of the villain. But Manto leaves it to the reader who may decide on his own as to what circumstances they may have been, or if Zaheer behaved nicely with the girl initially and then after winning her trust and capturing her in his house he forced prostitution on her. Here also an indirect hint towards breaking of trust may be seen and commodification of women or objectifying women is clearly evident. This theme of prostitution provides relevance to the stories of Manto who wrote about the society of his times and picked up his stories and characters from the society itself. In his another short story 'The Hundred Candle Power Bulb', the theme of prostitution takes another turn when the reader finds a husband forcing his wife into the dark pit of prostitution. The tragedy here is that a man who is supposed to fight for the honour of his wife is the one who is selling it because of the economic condition. It is a fact that men sold their women (wives, daughters, sisters) at the time of Partition under different circumstances and earning money was one of these many things. At the time of Partition majority of the people were not able to migrate timely with all their possessions and valuables with safety. The economic depression and turmoil which was witnessed at the time of Partition was of great magnitude and it compelled refugees to indulge in such immoral deeds that had caused death of humanity.

In his short story 'Sharifan', Manto had brought out the actual circumstances and inferno through which women had to live during Partition. In this story Manto has touched the root of the cause of violence driven by vengeance. Through Qasim he has portrayed men who were actually the perpetrators of violence, Manto had also tried to enquire in this story the reason or the origin of this vengeance that drove men mad and caused deaths of innocent women and girls. The scene in which Manto describes Qasim tripping over the naked dead body of his fourteen year old daughter and deciding to take revenge as he stammered out of his house causes the utter shock to the reader. The scene in which Qasim is shown to be taking revenge by perpetrating violence on the body of a fourteen year old Hindu girl. It is not as if he does not realise the horror of his deed, he realises what he has done and is horrified at the very sight of the body of that Hindu girl which is lying on the ground stark naked, the dead body reminded him of his daughter Sharifan and he covers his eyes with his hands, the continuity to this violence is provided by Manto when the father of this Hindu girl comes in the house and seeing the naked dead body staggers out of the house in the same way that Qasim did. The repetition in the description shows the continuity of the violence and the cause of massacre.

Throughout these stories a reader comes across female characters from different walks of life but the similitude that connects all these women is the silence that can be heard in their pain and agony, in the tragedies of their lives, the silence that lingers in the eyes of Bismillah, the action of Sakina, the death of Sharifan and the frustration of the woman in 'The Hundred Candle Power Bulb'. These women may be observed as the Subalterns who cannot speak and are understood as mere objects and commodities for possession and consumption respectively. Manto however proves to be the much needed spokesperson of these women but in contrast of the colonising spokesmen who were misrepresenting the subalternised Indians as merely snake charmers. Manto goes deep into the psyches of both the perpetrators of violence and of those who are at the receiving end. His sympathetic attitude towards the women who were victimised during Partition makes him a soft hearted representative of women of the era. It surprises a reader and may delight him/her on seeing a man understanding the pain of subalternised women with such a depth and with such great understanding. Manto was able to actually depict the pain and misery of these women on paper and his works became a mirror to society. Although he was tried for obscenity in his works but he never stepped back from telling of truth of his era. An infernal darkness which enveloped the whole subcontinent, provided nothing but obscenity for Manto to write upon, as it is always the surroundings and society which a writer pens down on paper colored with his/her imagination.

Manto may be noted as the spokesperson of his era and more so of the women of his age. He wrote stories which portrayed women as silenced and victimised, oppressed and commoditised. He also brought to light the vicious circle of stereotype and social conditioning because of which women reached in this state, the unrest of Sakina on the absence of a dupatta when she was found by the volunteers of the rehabilitation committee. The agony of sleepless nights and continuous physical labour and the constant fear of losing their lives or something apocalyptic, befalling them. These women who totally depended on their male counterparts for protection against the rioters at the time of Partition when suffered a loss of family or pain and tragedy of separation from their families for one or the other reason broke down and either committed suicide or became dead emotionally. For instance the women who were abducted and raped or converted or forcefully married to

the men of other community refused to return to their homes and families for the fear of rejection due to the loss of their chastity, this happened because the body defined personality of a woman and her body became the means of extracting revenge on the opposite community for the men of all the communities. This shame and pain to which these women were subjected to was not entitled to them as Manto in his short story 'By God' he expresses his concern towards these abducted and oppressed women whom the society named runaways, Manto questions as to why these women were called runaways because they were not the ones who entered in prostitution willingly or who sold of their chastity to the men of other communities. Thus, through his short stories Manto establishes himself as the spokesperson for the women victimised during Partition.