

Transformation of Woman's Body into Values and Exchange: Reading Manto on Prostitutes

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Abstract

This work considers a neglected question of the transaction of woman's body into values; where a woman's self is divided between her use and exchange values. It demonstrates how women are transacted as gifts vis-a-vis the Manto's protagonists. It operates the stories where masculinity plays the decisive role in the construction of the social order where women are asserted meaning or given value through exchanges and transactions. The essay will examine the personalities of prostitutes in Manto's stories: Hatak, Behind the Reeds and Kali Salwar, whose bodies are assigned the certain value by pimps, and their male customers.

Keywords: *Manto, Women, Personality, Values.*

Introduction

“The prostitute remains to be considered explicitly condemned by the social order; she is implicitly tolerated and no doubt because the break between usage and exchange is, in her case, less clear-cut and 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”.

Luce Irigaray

Sadat Hassan Manto stands alone in the position; he takes on women and has examined closely the inhabitants of the gendered space, the brothel. The stories selected for this endeavor would scrutinize the sexual figure of the prostitute, the brothel and its inhabitants. Manto develops a set of themes around the national-allegorical possibilities of 'woman' as a signifier. He simultaneously explodes such possibilities by turning into sexually and morally displaced figures, figures at the heart of the controversies concerning obscenity that his stories created. As Irigaray contends, a woman's identity is declared as an identity independent of male-centric ideas. She states that ‘females' negative view exists not because of how a woman behaves "naturally" but because of predetermined theoretical-bias that has pigeon-holed women into roles and labels. This is what is observed in 'Hatak'—‘The Insult'. The pimp Ram Lal in 'The Insult' doesn't understand the inexplicable suffering of the whores he sells. Here the prostitute Saugandhi maintains a curious fiction with her lover who always manages to extract

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money from her. He keeps insisting that she should give up her profession and let him support her—even as they both know, it is, she and her trade that supports him. He exaggeratedly threatens to leave her if she doesn't clean her room of the paraphernalia of her trade, i.e. bottles of cheap perfumes and makeup, flashy clothing and pornographic prints on the wall. It reflects the idea of Irigaray how it is made impossible for women to exist separately. 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. The strong stability of this world is erupted by the brief encounter with a bourgeois client, the event hinted at the title—'Hatak'. The car's window is rolled down, as someone inside the car shines a flashlight in her face for a brief, blinding moment. The light is then shut off, Saugandhi hears a grunt of displeasure—unh!—the window is rolled back up. Ram Lal walks away, "Didn't like you. I suppose"—and Saugandhi is left standing all alone, a storm having been unleashed in her mind as a result of that 'unh'!

Manto gives an account of her insurmountable anger on being spurned by the 'gentleman'. The word 'unh' 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 head reels from the rejection, and she begins to wonder why it wounded her so much. Her self-assumptions are disrobed to 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 the years. This wound diminishes her current price down to zero, what Irigaray calls the 'exchange' value in terms of "gold, or phalluses."

Her consciousness is in a state of flux, inexplicably decimated. She can feel the pain but at the same time is benumbed on the pulses; she also wishes that the pain engulfed her body so that she can escape thinking of what has occurring her. She goes on to figure out what 'unh' meant:

'What a joke! This girl is so ugly even her mother can't bear looking at her.'

'I wouldn't let this bitch shine my shoes'

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

'Ram Lal, You went out of your way to praise this girl. Ten rupees for this woman is too much. A cow's asshole would be better.'

Her assumptions and the deconstruction of one word—'unh' or if translated into more crude terms would be 'yuck', reflects not only the flux of her mind but an urge to be

accepted by a man, which is also examined by Gayatri Spivak when she examines the validity/acceptance of the western representation of the 'other'. Sugandhi doesn't realize that after all, she is selling herself as a commodity to which the buyer had the 'right' to refuse. She is a commodity in, by and large, a masculine world where "Man endows the commodities, he produces with a narcissism that blurs the seriousness of the utility, of use. Desire as soon as there is an exchange, perverts need". The story ends with something very powerful however illusionary, while she thinks of confrontation 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 have inside me!" This is an example of 'value-added service'. Sugandhi thinks she is the owner and is trying to restore her ability to manipulate and lure men. Therefore, Sugandhi's exchange value is determined by society, while her use-value is her qualities.

As, Gayle Rubin says "Sex/gender systems are not a historical emanation of the human mind, they are the products of historical human activity", and that's how the man-kind has turned and twisted the commodified 'other' of its species to various purposes. Hardly has she known that she is being exchanged as a commodity in between men and for men. Irigaray argues that our entire society is predicated on this exchange of women. The reading of the story "Hatak" or other stories of Manto with prostitutes as principal characters, one may be inspired to question the authoritative intent of a man who claims the insight into sexual affinities and sexual behaviour of women.

Behind the reeds, mammi and kali salwar

Luce Irigaray in 'Women on the Market', considers a woman's self-divided between her use and exchange values, and she is only desired for the exchange value, therefore considers three most broadly categorized roles of women. The mother who is all use-value, the virgin who is all exchange value and the prostitute who embodies both use and exchange value. Manto's most ironic comment on the solemnities of motherhood as a signifier comes in 'Mammi' (Mummy). This recounts a series of encounters in Poona between Manto and an older English widow named Stella Jackson, whom everyone addresses as 'Mummy'. The very idea of family is turned on its head by this loose and voluntary association of individuals brought together by their love of Mummy's company. Motherhood is ironized more than this figure—foreign, garishly made-up, drunk and sexually permissive.

In, 'Behind the Reeds' there are three women and only one man as the decisive forces behind the economics of exchange. Haibat khan possessed a woman outside the

acceptable norms of society. 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 an adulterous relation with the widow of his friend, it is Haibat who perpetrates the sin in being connected to the two women at the same time and both located in the realms of commodified otherness. He does not follow the conventional social exchange method. He pounces on his object of desire without following men's arrangement of exchange of women among them in the socially accepted sense.

Luce Irigaray contends that "men circulate women among themselves" according to a rule known as the incest taboo. 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 their conquests, seductions, possessions, both sequentially and cumulatively, are measured as their standards.

Manto's 'Kali Salwar' reflects the above-quoted words and Sultana; a prostitute is following her lover and pimp, Khuda Baksh from Ambala to Delhi, an urban space. Sultana's initial inability to find her home, her bearings, in this place called "Delhi", would suggest the uniform space of nation and citizenship, seemingly without the landmarks of status, difference and belonging that allows her to navigate within the regime of colonial sovereignty that in this story is given the name "Ambala". In other words, if Ambala signifies the military enforced relationship of a tributary colonial state to its subaltern subjects, Delhi represents the modern regime of power that Foucault called 'governmentality'. Khuda Baksh takes her to the city on the pretext of more income and makes her dependent on him completely whilst it is Khuda Baksh who is financially dependent on Sultana. Khuda Baksh 'possesses' her completely in the city, indispensable to man. At the beginning of the story, their first clients in Delhi approach them, and Khuda Baksh is the lover who transacts Sultana. That implies a distinction between gift and giver.

As Gayle Rubin puts it, "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 than a partner to it. If women are the gifts, then it is men who are the exchange partners. The relations of such a system are such that women are no position to realize the benefits of their own circulation". The masculine world plays a decisive role in constructing a social order where women/objects are given value through exchange and transactions. Therefore, a woman's self is divided and is exchanged between men the same way as commodities is exchanged.

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