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Surfacing from Within: Fallen Women in Manto's Fiction¹

BY NOW, feminist criticism has already popularized the need for voicing the absent, the silenced and the inarticulate. And it has been nearly five decades now since a significant writer in Urdu had the vision to present pulsating glimpses of the invisible and silent woman, the woman fallen from the mainstream society of honorable ladies and gentlemen. In a number of Manto's stories, there is an impending sense of immediacy with which one confronts a totally degenerate society, a world of enslaved women, of women commodified and consumed in accordance with the unquestioned fact of male sexual need and the principle of supply and demand. Indeed, one does not have to be a woman writer to creep into the inner terrain of the psyche of the oppressed or the exploited female. Manto demonstrates an androgynous sensibility and an extraordinary sensitivity. A writer of his caliber did not have to be a woman to perceive the dehumanization of a society which nourished callous male exploitation of female sexuality. There is an inevitability in the narration of such stories as "Hatak," "Maḥmūda," "Bābū Gōpīnāḥ," and many others. Manto just had to tell these stories, which gradually merge into a long confessional tale of human civilization recorded in literature. He did not have to weave any formalistic patterns, nor did the experiences of his story seek the support of any mythology or romance. There is an unusual directness about his stories in which he presents a specific kind of con-

¹*Editors' note:* Although the author has worked from a Devanagari transcription of these and other Manto stories discussed here, the Urdu originals thereof are available in Sa'adat Ḥasan Maṇṭō, *Maṇṭōrāmā* (Lahore: Sang-e Mīl Pablikēshanz, 1990) and *Maṇṭōnāma* (Lahore: Sang-e Mīl Pablikēshanz, 1990), henceforward referred to in the body of the text as *MR* and *MN*.

sciousness of women sobbing without tears, remaining out of general sight, women who are made to sell their virtue in the market to become castaways. They live in an infernal underworld, invisible to the respectable society which pretends ignorance of its existence. Ironically, not only has it produced this world, it also provides it full sustenance.

Its hypocritical indifference to such a world is not just a quiet consent to its existence. In fact, it is due to the vested interests of patriarchal society that prostitution survives because it does not seem to threaten any of its fundamental principles. Let it be so then! But not so with Manto! A writer who could see through the pretension of a “moral” law erecting its mythology of good and bad on the laissez-faire economics of male sexuality. He needed no metaphoric or symbolic masks to construct the reality of that “other,” the other which has been pushed into the seclusion of a black world, if only to satiate men sexually so that they lead a so-called normal domestic life, based ironically on chastity and the homely virtues prescribed for their women.

In Manto’s story “Maḥmūda” (*MN*, pp. 562–70), we witness in the character Mustaqim the anguish of a protagonist who is unable to actively save Mahmuda from slipping into the gruesome circumstance of becoming a prostitute for her sheer survival. Mustaqim is drawn towards her extraordinarily beautiful big eyes on his wedding day. A keen attentiveness about her settles in his consciousness forever, and he follows her life with acute sensitivity through the news from his wife. A simple girl of humble background, Mahmuda is married to a railway employee who turns into an eccentric *maulvi* within two years of his marriage, with poor Mahmuda left alone to fend for herself. Mustaqim finds himself getting more and more concerned about the fate of Mahmuda, but from a distance. The greater his sympathy, the greater his wife’s alertness. When Mahmuda is driven to “bad ways” through her husband’s indifference and lack of propriety, Mustaqim wishes to save her and bring her home. Kulsum, his wife, will not hear of it. He knows he could give her shelter, save her from falling into the abysmal world and marry her to a respectable man. But Mustaqim is incapable of action, and like hundreds of other men and women of respectable society, he becomes an accomplice in contributing to the degeneration of humanity. In his inaction lies his consent, and with his consent the fraudulence of his sensitivity is certified. Towards the end of the story he introspects,

If only I could have resisted my wife ... she’d have been upset only for a while and perhaps would have gone away to her parents for a

few days. It would have saved Mahmuda from submitting to that filthy existence. Why did I not save her? Did I have honest intentions? Had I been honest and truthful, Kulsum would have come around soon enough. I have committed a great crime, I have sinned. (p. 570)

But all such debating and confessions were like “the last dose of oxygen to a dying patient” (*ibid.*). As fate would have it, two and half years later, after Partition, in Karachi, Mustaqim comes face to face with the image of Mahmuda made up as a vulgar market prostitute surrounded by people cracking dirty jokes with her. Before he could run away and escape an encounter, Mahmuda addresses him, inviting him to a “first class *pān*” (*ibid.*) and announcing that she had participated in his wedding. Mustaqim is absolutely frozen. He feels himself a guilty participant in her downfall. This is indeed a tragedy of inaction, quietly enacted over and over again in society, enabling some people to continue abusing human existence. Neither the mental proximity of Mahmuda nor an increasingly abstract relationship with her could elicit any action from Mustaqim, a typical middle-class person who could find cerebral avenues of escape and remain a coward. Talking of Kulsum, Mustaqim’s wife, Manto dismisses her as a woman typical in her jealousy and “possessiveness,” incapable of transcending her self-centeredness to help save a fellow woman. Perhaps her insecurity is a meaningful cause for her denial of shelter to Mahmuda. She might end up losing her husband to Mahmuda if she were to give her place in her house! But that is obviously not the focal point of the story. Mahmuda’s transition from a modest, demure subject to that legendary object of consumerist passion is perceived through the inert consciousness of Mustaqim. What is implied is the functional complicity in the brutalization of women in society.

From Mahmuda, sitting as an exhibitionist at a *pān* shop, Manto takes us in his story “Hatak” (Insult; *MR*, pp. 896–919) to the very center of the prostitute’s existence—to her dreary room. With Rajinder Singh Bedi’s complex story “Kalyānī” as the backdrop, “Hatak” seems a simple, straightforward, but very powerful narration of the story of the alienated, deadened prostitute coming alive through a sense of utter humiliation. A stereotyped representation of Saugandhi would have merely yielded an anesthetized picture of a prostitute with layers of social prejudice and obscurantist beliefs. For Saugandhi to breathe as flesh-and-blood in the story, Manto had to simply cut across all pretensions of the hegemonic sexist approach. To cross the threshold and peep into the other’s

consciousness does not mean just a single step. It is a dive, a journey demanding commitment, perseverance, courage, and stoicism, for to cross this threshold is not to step into safety but rather into a nightmare; it is a plunge into vague unconnected territories of the mind.

Entering Saugandhi's room in the beginning of the story, one has to negotiate with the sense of the macabre accentuated by the sound of the tingling silver coins tucked inside Saugandhi's blouse, vibrating as she breathes heavily "with the silver melting and dripping into her heart" (p. 896). There is not just this one point, but a whole shifting subliminal line of thresholds to be crossed to reach the disjointed territories of the protagonist's mind. Saugandhi's chatter with Jamuna about the tactics and strategies she uses with various men is merely a show of theoretical knowledge. In actual fact, the story tells us, she is intensely emotional and at the slightest suggestion of warmth by a man, she'd melt into total submission, and yet remain forever hungry for love.

She likes to remain suspended between a sense of being and non-being, and feels suffocated with so much air "above her, below her, and around her" (p. 900). The immensity of "desire," and the need for a totality in her, create an unending demand for love, and she deliberately blinds herself to the lie uttered by her male customer every night: "Saugandhi, I love you" (p. 901). She'd slip into an illusion of love and believe she could love any man who came to her. She wonders why men do not possess that kind of goodness. And yet, at the peak of her feelings, Saugandhi wishes to take her man into her lap and put him to sleep, patting and singing to him.

The make-believe world of love constructed by Saugandhi has within its folds Madho, very prominent in sustaining her dream. With a husband-like propriety over her, Madho provides nourishment to the starved Saugandhi through his regular visits, unfulfilled promises of material help, and meaningless utterances. But Saugandhi is happy to live that lie, since there is no possibility of living its truth anyway. In "Maḥmūda," the fact of prostitution is bared of all myth or magic, and the motivating factors giving rise to prostitution are indicated as economic exigency, combined with a lack of social structure for destitute women, as well as the callousness of so-called "sensitive" fellow human beings. In "Hatak," we are face to face with an already prostituted Saugandhi, who sustains her essential womanhood by constructing a lie motivated by emotion and an urgent need to love. The depths of her womanhood remain intact. She is not a negativity, an absence, or a "deviant," because she has not internalized the inevitable social judgment pronounced on such women—that

she is “evil.” The cleavages and tensions operating at the various levels of her consciousness converge into an intense moment of deep realization: Saugandhi is rejected by a mere “Ooun!” uttered by the Seth; the male surveyor spits at the object on display. It’s not as if she has never been rejected before. But this happens to be the moment when she has to face the reality of her existence, squarely staring at her. These moments of humiliation churn out the entire truth of her being. And the lie of love has to explode.

Saugandhi’s interior monologue at this point of the story strips her naked to herself. She goes through an existential anguish precisely because she is capable of an intense inward journey. The requisite capacity to liberate herself from exploitation has been retained in her, and she has kept her emotional and human self alive, even though through a lie. But that lie has to be actively exploded now. The make-believe has to be demolished—Madho has to go. Saugandhi acts from the center of her being when she turns him out after articulating concretely the fraudulence of their relationship. But then there is no knowing what is false, and what, the truth! The vacuum and horrifying silence surrounding her after Madho’s departure has to be filled up—perhaps by another lie. She picks up her diseased dog and puts him on her bed, next to herself. I think of some lines from Amy Levy’s poem “Magdalen” here:

And there is neither false nor true;
But in a hideous masquerade
All things dance on, the ages through.
And good is evil; evil good;
Nothing is known or understood
Save only pain. ...²

It is the writer’s sheer commitment to authenticity that makes him articulate so minutely the specific consciousness of an individual, in this case that of a woman who is a prostitute—so specific and yet so universally relevant. Such a literary discourse lends order to experience and makes possible the active participation of the reader. Inevitably this throws open the possibilities of psychic rebellion, transformation, and a new future. The end of the story is the beginning of a fresh journey after crossing a

²*The Complete Novels and Selected Writings of Amy Levy, 1861–1889*, ed. Melvyn New (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993), p. 380. —Eds.

series of crises. “Hatak” forges a forbidden social liaison across the divisions of moral law and sexual myth. Saugandhi, then, stands shifted from dream to waking, establishing an autonomy of the woman’s existence after having made a definite choice of demolishing the make-believe world, so consciously created and maintained by her.

From amongst Manto’s various female characters, the woman who emerges as one of the most potent, independent, and androgynous personalities is Mrs. Stella Jackson of the story entitled “Mammī” (Mummy; *MN*, pp. 179–220). Pilar of Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and Gertrude Stein stand alongside Stella Jackson not only in generating a sense of freedom around themselves but also in initiating other men and women into a life of authentic action. Morally upright, strong women of conviction and experienced in life, these women become the axis around whom a large number of people revolve, seeking psychological support, maternal care, and emotional protection. Stella Jackson is “Mummy,” a woman with an independent status which is a direct result of her own interaction with reality. She will therefore not fit into any prefabricated role model. Nor will she be a party to any complicity in the brutalization of women. All those men—Chadda, Ranjit Kumar, Ghareeb Nawaz, and many others who come to her are like her adopted children. With a catlike attentiveness, she keeps track of each one of them; while in a drunken state they are not allowed to take liberties with her young girls. Even her favorite, Chadda, is slapped and turned out of her house when he tries to get at Phyllis, a mere fifteen-year-old girl. Chadda ultimately respects “Mummy” for having checked his animal instincts. It is she who has spontaneously taken over the responsibility of nursing him when he falls seriously ill. The story enlists a number of instances when “Mummy” has come to the rescue of one or the other, demonstrating her generosity, the capaciousness of her heart, and her readiness to help with every resource she has. The entire credit for the triumph of truth, that of Ramsingh’s confession and the subsequent burial of the murder case in the court, goes to “Mummy’s” conviction and advice that Ramsingh should simply narrate the truth. But then eventually the same “Mummy” is turned out of the city for being a prostitute.

It is here that the writer gets carried away and blatantly makes Chadda indulge in sloganeering, upholding the character of “Mummy” and offering her to all those who may swing in the wave of perversion, for “Mummy” to check them. She has, after all, the capacity to be everyone’s Mummy! Contrasted with this is the sharpness of the indictment of the

world which juggles truths and falsehoods, to and fro. Augusta Webster's (d. 1894) poem uses the language of the market:

our tradesmen, who must keep unspotted names
and cheat the least like stealing that they can:
our—all of them, the virtuous worthy men
who feed on the world's follies, vices, wants,
and do their businesses of lies and shams
honestly, reputably, while the world
claps hand and cries "good luck," which of these trades,
their honourable trades, barefaced like mine,
all secrets brazened out, would shew more white³

While an old "harlot" could be so compassionate and a mother to all, in the story "Bābū Gōpīnāth"^h (*MN*, pp. 276–91) Manto locates a male counterpart of a similar temperament in the person of Babu Gopinath. Gopinath has taken under his wing Zeenat, an inexperienced, almost naïve young girl. She could very well have become a toy in his hands, an object for entertainment, exhibition, and sexual exploitation. But Babu Gopinath cares for her with a paternal passion and wants her to settle down on her own so that she'd not be wasted or become helpless after him. Love for Zeenat includes his care, respect, and an anxiety for her well-being. He persists in making all efforts to expose her to other men of means, so that she may end up getting some support. His selfless involvement and sense of fulfillment when her marriage is fixed with the wealthy *zamīndār* (landowner) are evident. A lover turned father, Babu Gopinath does not allow anyone to insult or hurt her. The story ends with the touching scene of Babu Gopinath becoming tearful when the narrator cracks a joke at Zeenat's expense.

What is so satisfying and striking is Manto's unusually alert antennae, turned towards life, with each human being under his sensitive scrutiny. Human beings cannot be mere abstractions to him. His commitment as a humanist inevitably introduces the voice of dissension into his art and also into his life. His sensitive handling of human experience results in a positive salvaging of the dignity of human existence. In fact, the apparently gory world of his art records the aesthetic gesture of reclamation and

³"A Castaway," in her *Portraits*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1870), p. 39. —*Eds.*

solidarity in identifying intense moments of cognition of human anguish, which in turn arouses compassion for the oppressed. The stories discussed in this paper betray the strain of that social morality which founds its whole system of good and evil on the sexual propriety of women. To impose any labels on Manto would undoubtedly limit the scope of his art. Given a feminist reading, however, his stories show how literature can become a potent weapon in disturbing the established modes of existence through a sensitive focusing on the generally “excluded” aspect of human consciousness. As Hélène Cixous remarks in *The Newly Born Woman*, “That which is not obliged to reproduce the system, that is writing. ... [I]t invents new worlds.”⁴ Manto just could not accept pigeon-holed and straight-jacketed ideas and systems. That, in a manner of speaking, was the tragedy of his life, and, ironically, a point of salvation for his art. □

⁴There seems to be some discrepancy in the author’s reproduction of this quote, which appears as an epigram in Sandra M. Gilbert’s Introduction (p. ix) to Betty Wing’s translation of Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) and reads: “Everyone knows that a place exists which is not economically or politically indebted to all the vileness and compromise. That is not obliged to reproduce the system. That is writing. If there is a somewhere else that can escape the infernal repetition, it lies in that direction, where *it* writes itself, where *it* dreams, where *it* invents new worlds.” —*Eds.*