Manto: Narratives of Gendered Sexual Violence in Pakistan Pre and Post- Partition

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ABSTRACT

When considering the ways in which we contextualise and process the past, it is imperative to locate how identity-based politics have contributed to the ongoing disciplining of women. Postcolonial literature critiquing the state-backed moral regulation of women in Pakistan has been subjected to censorship through religious propaganda and state control. This paper will examine the works of 'controversial' Urdu short story writer Saadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955). Manto's works addressed the gendered sexual violence of the Partition, which created the independent states of India and Pakistan in 1947. As women were inextricably linked to notions of 'honour' and 'nationhood,' their bodies became the site of sexual violence. This paper reflects on Pakistan's creation as a separate homeland for Muslims to explain why Manto's writings addressing gendered sexual violence were considered against the ethos of Islam. Since the Muslim woman's body represented national and religious honour in Pakistan, the narratives of Muslim women were deliberately silenced. This paper further illustrates how Manto used his agency as a male writer to amplify the traumatic experiences of women despite facing legal challenges. Moreover, this work focuses on Manto's efforts in challenging the patriarchal power structures and the disciplinary order maintained through hegemonic masculinity. This paper draws on Manto's short stories *Open It* and *Colder Than Ice* to elucidate how Manto exposed a culture of silence, which problematises the state's continued control over the Muslim woman's body under the vague pretence of protecting Pakistan's 'Islamic' social fabric.

Keywords: Manto, Gender-based violence, Honour | Nationalism, Culture of Silence, Partition, Postcolonial Literature, Islam, Pakistan, Hegemonic Masculinity

INTRODUCTION

August 1947 marked the end of Britain's imperial rule over the Indian Subcontinent. Following Britain's official departure, the Partition created two independent states of India and Pakistan, which is a process that has been described as a "deeply violent and gendered experience" (Chakraborty, 2014, 41). Urvashi Butalia, in her book *The Other Side of Silence,* goes a step further in describing the widespread "sexual savagery" of Partition, which resulted in the rape or abduction of about 75,000 women by men of "religions different from their own (and indeed sometimes by men of their own religion)" as well (Butalia, 2000, 3). It is estimated that approximately twelve million people moved between the two newly created states in the span of a few months, and while Hindus and Sikhs moved east into India, Muslims travelled west into Pakistan (Butalia, 2000, 3). This mass movement of people was so tense and negatively charged that the exchange resulted in communal violence, with women becoming its primary

targets. Markers such as family, community, nation, and state colluded in producing 'woman' as a "symbol of honor and therefore as a location of violence" (Chakraborty, 2014, 42).

MANTO- A REFLECTIVE SNAPSHOT

Urdu short story writer Saadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955) not only problematised the postcolonial state formation of India and Pakistan through his literary works but also situated the conditions of colonial trauma that contributed to gendered sexual violence. In doing so, he also upset the patriarchal power structures maintained through hegemonic masculinity. As will be highlighted further, Pakistan was created as a separate homeland for Muslims following the Partition of 1947. However, as women were inextricably linked to notions of 'honour' and 'nationhood,' they subsequently became primary targets of sexual violence, which was largely motivated by religion. Since then, there has been a calculated attempt by the Pakistani state and its machinery to mask the narratives of Muslim women who were either raped or abducted at the time of Partition. Drawing upon Manto's short stories, *Open It,* and *Colder Than Ice* is an effective way to reflect on how the state's disciplinary and regulatory power is manifested through censorship and propaganda, which persecuted Manto and contributed to the silencing of Muslim women's narratives of sexual violence.

Manto's writings, mainly his short stories, addressed the rape and abduction of women irrespective of their faith. But the newly created Muslim-majority state of Pakistan took a heavy-handed approach against Manto since the state was created strictly in the name of Islam, and its machinery considered it obligatory to uphold the sanctity of the religion. Thus, the government of Pakistan labeled Manto's writings as being in contravention of 'Islamic' teachings, which then justified the legal proceedings against him. At various times throughout his career, Manto's publications were both banned and boycotted on the grounds that they were 'obscene.' It appears that his works addressing women who were sexually targeted or forced into prostitution during or after the Partition were considered obscene because Muslim women were perceived to be the upholders of religious honour and any discussion concerning their sexuality or oppression signaled social stigma. Therefore, controlling the knowledge production surrounding his work effectively made the reading of Manto's short stories taboo in Pakistani society.

Sociologist Stephen Murray notes "the common Islamic ethos of avoidance in acknowledging sex and sexualities," which is useful in highlighting the prevalent tendency

within Islamic societies to amplify gender differences and suppress debate on the oppression of women using religion (Khan, 2016, 162). However, leading Islamic scholar and feminist Amina Wadud confronts such a rationale by pointing out, "many popular or dominant ideas about the role of women do not have sanction from the Qur'an" (Wadud, 1999, 62). More so, since Pakistan represents an androcentric culture, "females are looked upon in terms of their utility to men, which is primarily reproductive" (Wadud, 1999, 81). Wadud's position can be further corroborated by R.W. Connell, who also observes, "biologism leads to a drive to control women's sexuality in the name of racial purity" (Connell, 1987, 246). To this effect, it is unsurprising that women who had been raped, abducted, or forced into prostitution were no longer considered useful to men and were thus, discarded from the collective narrative. Nevertheless, Manto used the medium of short story writing to bring the oppression of women into the mainstream by giving agency to those Muslim women who had found themselves in the lowest echelons of Pakistani and Islamic society.

Manto was predominantly considered a controversial figure owing to his "explicit representations of sexuality" (Daiya, 2011, 55). His writing had upset the established law because he was critical of the various forms of discursive and embodied violence that women were subjected to at the time of Partition (Daiya, 2011, 55). Using writing as a form of agency, Manto highlighted, "the female subject's dehumanizing reduction to a sexual object of communal consumption and ethnic exchange" (Daiya, 2011, 55). In particular, Manto challenged the patriarchal ideology, which "constructed women as male, communal property" by indiscriminately exposing Hindu, Muslim and Sikh men for not only abducting and raping women of the other community but also for sexually targeting women of their own community (Daiya, 2011, 80). He was also very critical of the "local subjectivizing process" through which women's bodies were violated to produce "historicist narratives of communal and national honor" instead of understanding them as products of patriarchal power, urban dislocation, and poverty (Daiya, 2011, 86).

OPEN IT- INTRA-RELIGIOUS SEXUAL VIOLENCE

The practice of viewing women as communal property can be exemplified through Manto's short story *Khol Do*, which literally translates to 'open it' in English. Written in 1952, *Open It* traces the journey of a Muslim man named Sirajuddin, who fled the Partition violence with his family by catching a train from what is now the Indian city of Amritsar to Lahore in Pakistan

(Manto, 2011, 8). Sirajuddin has flashbacks of losing his wife to communal violence while crossing into Pakistan. Suddenly, a more pressing concern takes over his mind as he recalls that his young daughter Sakina is missing (Manto, 2011, 9). He finds Sakina's *dupatta* (veil) inside his coat pocket and is immediately reminded of how it had fallen to the ground when they were trying to escape a raging mob in Amritsar. Manto purposefully references the *dupatta* as it is widely considered a symbol of honour both for a Muslim woman and the men that she is associated with. In this case, however, Sirajuddin is left with a *dupatta* instead of the daughter, who should have been wearing it to uphold his honour. Subsequently, a panic-stricken Sirajuddin decides to enlist the help of a few young and armed Muslim men volunteering to bring back women and children who had either gotten lost or separated from their families while crossing the border into Pakistan (Manto, 2011, 9). Sirajuddin describes his daughter to these men, who then assure him that if she is alive, they will help bring Sakina back to Sirajuddin.

On one of their trips, the Muslim men eventually find a girl who fits the description of Sirajuddin's daughter. Once they approach her, she runs off to a nearby field until the men chase after her calling out, "Don't be frightened. Is your name Sakina?" (Manto, 2011, 9). Confused and scared, Sakina finally confesses that she is, in fact, Sirajuddin's daughter. Meanwhile, Sirajuddin spends his days wandering aimlessly from one refugee camp to another while praying for the safety of the men whom he had solicited help from. Several days later, he finally sees the men again and probes about Sakina. Once again, Sirajuddin is reassured that they will bring her back. That same evening, the unconscious body of a young girl found abandoned by the railway tracks is brought into the camp hospital (Manto, 2011, 10). Sirajuddin follows the four men carrying her in. When he discovers that the young girl is Sakina, Sirajuddin abruptly identifies himself as Sakina's father to the examining doctor (Manto, 2011, 10).

In a dimly lit room, the doctor points at the window and instructs old Sirajuddin to open it, "*khol do"* (Manto, 2011, 10). Upon hearing the command, a frail and limp Sakina shows signs of movement as her hands reach for the drawstring on her *shalwar* (loose trousers) to unfasten them (Manto, 2011, 10). Sakina then slowly pulls her trousers down and parts her thighs to reveal 'opened' legs. Sirajuddin, ignorant of Sakina's movement as an act of repeatedly being raped by the same Muslim men he had enlisted to help find her, shouts with joy, "She is alive. My daughter is alive" (Manto, 2011, 10). What Sirajuddin fails to consider in his moment of elation is that the sexually tormented and barely conscious Sakina had equated the authority

in the male doctor's voice with that of her rapists and had responded to the command accordingly (Daiya, 2011, 84). This gendered power relation described in *Open It* can be understood through the practice of viewing 'woman' as a part of a specific social relation to a 'man' that has been referred to as 'servitude' and "implies a personal and physical obligation" that women owe to men (Wittig, 2013, 108).

Unsurprisingly, *Open It* was not well-received in Pakistan as it had projected Muslim men as sexual predators and went against the popular nationalist narrative that men on the *other* side of the border (i.e., Hindu and Sikh men) were the perpetrators of sexual violence against Muslim women. Therefore, it is important to point out that Manto's short story was deemed unacceptable not because he had highlighted sexual violence against Muslim *women* but because he had tried to dishonour Muslim *men.*

JUSTIFICATIONS FOR CONTROLLING KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

A state that is heavily dependent on religious ideology is inevitably prone to regulating and managing gender regimes precisely in that manner (Connell, 1987, 255). Subsequently, sexual ideology is similarly produced by various players, including religious clergy, journalists, politicians, novelists, and academics, to name a few (Connell, 1987, 255). It must be noted, however, that measures are also taken to omit those narratives, which pose a threat to the state and its ideology. This can be best described as control of knowledge production.

Pakistan, as an Islamic state, in its deployment of misconstrued Islamic ideology, has ensured that the undermining influence of secularization is unable to permeate society. Thus, questions of gender and sexuality are placed under the purview of ministers and religious clergy. While intellectuals must play a pivotal role in highlighting structural inequality in sexual politics, they are often met with scrutiny and controversy (Connell, 1987, 257). As such, a sort of purification of the ideological world is undertaken "by excluding items that do not fit the implicit narrative," particularly, where the narrative is relevant to the public and could potentially hinder the state's ability to regulate its citizens (Connell, 1987, 247). As Michel Foucault also notes in *The History of Sexuality*, if sex is repressed or condemned to prohibition and silence then, the "mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression" (Foucault, 1987, 6). Also, "a person who holds forth in such language places himself to a certain extent outside the reach of power" and upsets established law, which is

crucial to understanding Manto's subsequent interactions with the state through its legal institutions (Foucault, 1987, 6).

Manto was persecuted on obscenity charges when he used his writing to highlight the experiences of raped and abducted women (Jalal, 2013, 148). The state was disinterested in remedying the injustices featured in Manto's controversial writings because it was simpler to continue promoting patriarchal notions of Islam under the nationalist project. Thus, a restrictive discourse on gender was used, which "insists on the binary of man and woman as the exclusive way to understand the gender field performs a regulatory operation of power that naturalizes the hegemonic instance and forecloses the thinkability of its disruption" (Butler, 2004, 43).

'COLDER THAN ICE'- MANTO'S BRUSH WITH THE LAW

Manto penned another short story titled *Thanda Gosht* or literally 'cold meat,' which has been translated into English under the title *Colder Than Ice.* This work is the story of a libidinous Sikh man named Ishwar Singh, who otherwise has an overactive sex drive (Jalal, 2013, 152). In the backdrop of the Partition violence in Punjab, however, Ishwar Singh returns home to his lover Kalwant Kaur and is unable to make love to her. Kalwant, convinced of Ishwar's infidelity, demands to know about the other woman in his life. Ishwar Singh's failure to provide an adequate answer provokes Kalwant to unsheathe Ishwar Singh's dagger and slash his throat.

She then begins to pull at his hair while shouting expletives at her unknown rival and continues scratching away at his face (Manto, 2011, 20). Ishwar Singh feels deserving of this punishment because he had taken part in communal riots during the Partition and had also kidnapped a young Muslim girl for his own pleasure (Jalal, 2013, 152). With the urgency to come clean to Kalwant, Ishwar confesses that he had broken into the house of a Muslim family and after killing six men with the same dagger Kalwant had just used to attack him with; he found himself unable to resist taking away a young girl from the household (Manto, 2011, 21).

He proceeds to tell her, "I can't even begin to describe to you how beautiful she was…I could have slashed her throat, but I didn't…I said to myself…. Ishr Sian, you gorge yourself on Kalwant Kaur every day… how about a mouthful of this luscious fruit!" (Manto, 2011, 21). Except, Ishwar had been under the false impression that the young girl had merely fainted when he carried her away to the railway tracks. Once he was about to force himself on her behind the bushes, he was shaken up when he discovered that the girl had already died of fear (Jalal, 2013,

152). Ishwar Singh announces, "She was dead…I had carried a dead body…a heap of cold flesh…" (Manto, 2011, 21). Ishwar Singh was unable to make love to Kalwant Kaur out of the "acute emotional agony" he found himself in, "not because he had killed innocent people but because he cannot get over the girl's cold flesh" (Jalal, 2013, 152). After hearing his confession, Kalwant Kaur reaches out for Ishwar Singh's hand only to notice that it was "colder than ice" (Manto, 2011, 21).

Colder Than Ice was published in a journal called *Javed* in 1949 and was widely distributed on the Subcontinent (Jalal, 2013, 154). A month later, all copies of the story were confiscated, the publisher's office was ransacked, and Manto's obscenity case was brought before the Press Advisory Board (Jalal, 2013, 155). One of the convenors on the panel pronounced, "…this sort of literature will not work in Pakistan," and his sentiments were widely echoed by many other conservative panelists as well (Jalal, 2013, 155). In Particular, Chaudhry Mohammad Hussain, the "self-appointed guardian of the newly created Muslim postcolonial state" outlined his scorn for Manto's story by arguing that its message was that "Muslims are so dishonorable that the Sikhs did not even spare one of our dead girls" (Jalal, 2013, 155).

This entire ordeal stirred a debate on the relationship between literature and ethics and whether art was a depiction of real life or social critique (Jalal, 2013, 156). However, it can be argued that Manto had effectively used literature as an art to criticize society. By naming the story's main character 'Ishwar' or 'God' in Hindi and casting him as an "agent of ethnic and sexual violence," Manto powerfully showcased the social violence influenced by religion (Daiya, 2011, 57). Expectedly, Manto defended his work by arguing that the mere title *Thanda Gosht* or 'cold meat' suggested "deadlike coldness" and so, it should have been obvious that he had not intended to arouse carnal passions (Jalal, 2013, 159). Despite Manto's explanations, the trial court declared Manto guilty of obscenity on 16 January 1950, and he was sentenced to three months of rigorous imprisonment consisting of hard labour and a fine of three hundred rupees (Jalal, 2013, 159). More so, the magistrate went on to conclude:

> Manto's story was lewd by the yardstick of Pakistani morality, which drew upon clearly articulated ethics in the Quran. The salacious and offensive language used by the characters in "Thanda Gosht" would corrupt young minds and undermine the social order (Jalal, 2013, 158).

> Manto was tried under Section 292-C of the *Obscenity Laws* enshrined within the

Pakistan Penal Code for writing and publishing *Colder Than Ice*. Section 292-C of the statute is applicable to whoever:

> takes part in or receives profits from any business in the course of which he knows or has reason to believe that any such obscene objects are, for any of the purposes aforesaid, made, produced, purchased, kept, imported, conveyed, publicly exhibited or in any manner put into circulation (Siddique, 2014, 21)

Though, it must be noted that the statute itself was a relic of British colonialism as it had been introduced into British Indian law in 1860 (Jalal, 2013, 156). Ironically, however, the *Obscenity Laws* had been subsumed into Pakistan's legal code and were then used against writers like Manto to promulgate 'Islamic' values in the *postcolonial* state of Pakistan. It was thought that Manto was corrupting Muslims in an Islamic society, and therefore, it was obligatory to use the law to reprimand him and protect the 'Islamic' social fabric of Pakistan.

Pakistan's *Obscenity Laws* are an appropriate example of how the state can use vague yet, religiously charged reasonings to control women's sexuality, and both promote and protect patriarchal notions of Islam in society. For example, the prosecuting Magistrate, as a representative of the state, operated "in the name of promoting, protecting, and enhancing the life of the national population," and by persecuting Manto, he was able to "produce clear ideas about the characteristics of who the national population is and which 'societal others' should be characterized as a 'drain' or 'threat' to that population" (Spade, 2011, 110).

The fear and repression that Manto's writing prompted were masked using the language of 'morals' and 'ethics,' which aimed to prohibit both implicit and explicit depictions of sexuality (Patel, 2001, 104). It can also be observed that subjecting Manto to legal punishment and reducing both Manto and his work to an anomaly reflected a simultaneous state effort to partake in the erasure of women's narratives. Furthermore, as the example of Manto's legal troubles indicate, power is much more than mere juridical constraint and can instead be perceived as both an organized set of constraints and as a regulatory mechanism (Butler, 2004, 50). To further elaborate on some regulatory measures, it is useful to consider the concept of 'hegemonic masculinity.'

HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY
Hegemonic masculinity can be described as any of the patterns or practices, including actions, expectations, behaviours or an overall identity that allow for the continuation of male

dominance over women (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, 832). As Judith Butler also notes, it is not biology but rather culture that becomes destiny, and thus, the paradox of human nature is that "it is *always* a manifestation of cultural meanings, social relations and power politics" (Lorber, 1993, 57). As such, hegemony does not necessarily entail violence since it can simply achieve its desired goal of oppressing women through an interplay of culture, institutions, and persuasion (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, 832). Similarly, in the case of Manto's writings, a network of state machinery was engaged to dissuade Manto from disrupting the social order, which thrives on pronouncing patriarchy as the norm.

Discourses play a pivotal role in the production and withholding of knowledge and the subsequent reproduction of ideology and representation. By charging Manto with obscenity and confiscating copies of his work, a heavy reliance on Islam as the state religion was required. To this effect, the Quran and the morals and ethics it ostensibly promotes were invoked repeatedly without offering context. Calling Manto's works into question for subject matters that were assumed to be under the purview of religious clergy with a strict reading of Islam insinuated that Manto was a threat to Islam and had inevitably hurt the sentiments of all Muslims. Viewed as an anomaly to Islamic society, Manto was barred from engaging in social critique, and subsequently, the state became an accomplice to the oppression of women.

Manto, as a male writer, was inconsistent with the expectancies of hegemonic masculinity in Pakistan. Since hegemonic masculinity is regarded as being normative and embodies the "most honored way of being a man," it also requires "all other men to position themselves in relation to it" in order to partake in ideologically legitimizing the subordination of women to men (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, 832). However, Manto's work did a disservice to both hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy by generating arguments about gender and sexuality and their intersection with cultural identity (Gopal, 2001, 244). A deeper understanding of Manto's attempt to blur the lines between gender relations by placing Ishwar Singh, a male, into a position of almost engaging in necrophilia subsequently shows that Manto gave agency to a woman's corpse and denied him the power over her body.

Manto carefully wrote the story in such a way that Ishwar Singh, the perpetrator of sexual violence, was "forcibly made aware of the fragility of his power and subject position"

through his impotency (Gopal, 2001, 253). As Priyamvada Gopal aptly highlights:

> Ishwar Singh's own masculinity is denaturalized and destabilized by the death of the gendered other who cannot perform the cognitive act of acknowledging the aggressor's power and difference from herself. By dying, by literally becoming 'not woman' and 'not human,' the potential rape victim disallows the enactment of gendered power relations. The burden of cognition falls then on Ishwar himself and the result is trauma (Gopal, 2001, 253).

Through a consideration of Manto's work, it is apparent that Manto used his short stories as a platform to outline the brutal gendered sexual violence of the Partition firstly, and secondly, he called into question the men who perpetrated this sexual violence. By default, he also questioned the state's complicity since the heterosexual male, or the bastion of heterosexual masculinity is endorsed by the state and is representative of its shared morality (Gopal, 2001, 247). Manto directly targeted the synthesis of hegemonic masculinity and the state by scorning men who, as "national subjects," and representatives of the state are viewed as "both agents and bearers of cultural values" (Gopal, 2001, 244). Yet, these same men, as outlined in *Open It,* took part in abducting and raping women whom they claimed superiority over.

Manto, then, challenged sex and the gender system, which indicated to him that "oppression is not inevitable" but rather, is the "product of specific relations which organize it" (Rubin, 1975, 40). Therefore, it is in the interest of the state to adopt and promote heterosexuality as a social system, "which is based on the social oppression of women by men" and produces "the doctrine of the difference between the sexes to justify this oppression" (Wittig, 2013, 108).

CONCLUSION

In revisiting Manto's works highlighting aspects of gendered sexual violence, it can be observed that Manto risked challenging the farcical notions of Islamic ideology through carefully crafted stories like *Open It* and *Colder Than Ice* that emphasized the ways in which the family, community and society at large, are influenced by vague and emotionally charged nationalist and religious rhetoric that produce 'woman' as a symbol of honour. However, Manto's stories became the object of scorn for demystifying the state's overt reliance on Islam to maintain hegemonic masculinity and to conceal the narratives of women brutalized by the sexual violence of Partition.

As Connell points out, "the interpretation of gender relations as natural facts is

extraordinarily widespread" (Connell, 1987, 245). This observation is particularly true of Pakistan's patriarchal society and how it defines its gender relations. Since Pakistan gained independence as a separate homeland for Muslims, its political leadership deployed Islam as the cornerstone of state formation. Thus, "theology justified a patriarchal power structure but hardly settled how it was to actually work" (Connell, 1987, 256). This could, therefore, explain why there is very little debate on how gender differences are reproduced in Islamic societies. Yet, statutes like the *Obscenity Laws* persecute those individuals who, like Manto, make the nationalist and religious inconsistencies more apparent.

Maintaining power relations that seek to uphold hegemonic order relies on norms, which are enforced through institutions that are capable of taking formal or informal disciplinary action (Spade, 2011, 106). Additionally, social or internal approval or shaming also constitute as effective methods of regulation (Spade, 2011, 106). In Manto's case, this was achieved through the courts, which invoked religious and nationalist rhetoric to extend beyond the scope of the legal domain and into society at large. As a result, Manto came to be viewed as a deviant transgressor and his writing was considered both offensive and shameful. This would, in turn, prevent the reading of his works and simultaneously silence the narratives of gendered sexual violence experienced by Muslim women both before and after the Partition.

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