



Postcolonial Feminism and the Representation of Women in Saadat Hasan Manto's Short Stories

Dr. Zartashia Hanif

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sardar Bahadur Khan Women's University, Quetta, Balochistan, Pakistan. Email: zartashiahanif@hotmail.com

Abstract

The Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 represents one of the most traumatic political and social transformations in South Asian history. The violence and displacement associated with this event profoundly affected millions of people, particularly women, who often became symbolic victims of communal conflict. Saadat Hasan Manto, one of the most prominent writers of Partition literature, portrayed the experiences of marginalized individuals with remarkable realism. This study examines the representation of women in selected short stories by Manto through the theoretical framework of postcolonial feminism. Using qualitative textual analysis, the paper analyzes stories including *Black Salwar*, *License*, *Toba Tek Singh*, *Loosen Up*, and *Black Marginalia*. The study argues that Manto's narratives reveal the multiple layers of oppression experienced by women in postcolonial societies, including patriarchal social norms, economic marginalization, and the consequences of political violence. Through his portrayal of female characters navigating oppressive environments, Manto exposes the social structures that contribute to women's marginalization. The findings suggest that Manto's fiction challenges dominant narratives that silence women's experiences and highlights the intersection of gender, power, and social inequality in postcolonial South Asia.

Keywords: Postcolonial feminism, Partition literature, Saadat Hasan Manto, gender representation, patriarchy

Introduction

The Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 remains one of the most devastating events in the history of South Asia. The division of British India into the independent states of India and Pakistan triggered widespread communal violence and mass displacement. Millions of individuals were forced to migrate across newly drawn borders, and countless families experienced the loss of homes, communities, and loved ones. While the political consequences of Partition have been widely documented, its social and psychological effects continue to shape the cultural memory of the region.

Women were among the groups most severely affected by the violence associated with Partition. Historical accounts reveal that women frequently became symbolic targets during communal conflicts. Abduction, rape, forced conversion, and honor killings occurred on a large scale as communities attempted to assert dominance over one another (Batalia, 2000). These acts of violence illustrate how women's bodies were often treated as representations of communal honor and identity.

Literature produced during and after the Partition provides valuable insight into these experiences. Through narrative representation, writers were able to explore the emotional and psychological consequences of violence and displacement. Among the writers who documented the human cost of Partition,



Saadat Hasan Manto occupies a distinctive position. Known for his bold realism and uncompromising portrayal of social realities, Manto wrote extensively about the lives of marginalized individuals during the Partition period.

Manto's stories frequently focus on characters who exist at the margins of society, including refugees, prostitutes, victims of violence, and individuals struggling with psychological trauma. His portrayal of women is particularly significant because it challenges conventional literary representations. Instead of presenting women as passive victims or symbols of national honor, Manto depicts them as individuals navigating complex social environments shaped by patriarchal norms and economic hardship.

The theoretical framework of postcolonial feminism provides a valuable lens through which to examine these narratives. Postcolonial feminist scholars argue that women in formerly colonized societies experience multiple layers of oppression, including patriarchal social structures, economic inequality, and the lingering effects of colonial rule (Ashcroft et al., 2013). By examining how these forces intersect, postcolonial feminism seeks to highlight the unique challenges faced by women in postcolonial contexts.

This study applies the framework of postcolonial feminism to analyze the representation of women in selected short stories by Saadat Hasan Manto. Through close textual analysis, the paper explores how Manto portrays the experiences of women living within societies shaped by both colonial legacies and patriarchal traditions. By examining the struggles of female characters in stories such as *Black Salwar*, *License*, *Toba Tek Singh*, *Loosen Up*, and *Black Marginalia*, the study demonstrates how Manto's narratives expose the gendered dimensions of social and political power.

Literature Review

The Partition of India generated a significant body of literary work that explores the emotional and social consequences of this historical event. Scholars studying Partition literature emphasize that the experiences of women reveal important dimensions of the conflict that are often overlooked in political histories (Menon & Bhasin, 1998). Women frequently became victims of violence and displacement, and their experiences illustrate how gender intersects with political and communal conflicts.

Several prominent writers addressed these issues in their works. Authors such as Amrita Pritam, Ismat Chughtai, Bhisham Sahni, and Rajinder Singh Bedi explored the experiences of women affected by Partition. Their narratives highlight the intersection of communal violence and patriarchal social structures that contributed to women's suffering.

Among these writers, Saadat Hasan Manto is widely recognized for his powerful portrayal of social realities during Partition. Critics have noted that Manto's stories challenge conventional literary representations of women by depicting them as complex individuals rather than idealized symbols (Jalal, 2013). His narratives reveal how social norms and economic structures shape women's lives within patriarchal societies.

Postcolonial feminist theory provides an important framework for analyzing these representations. Scholars within this tradition emphasize that women in postcolonial societies often experience **double marginalization**, facing both gender discrimination and the social consequences of colonial history (Mohanty, 1988). By examining how these forces intersect, postcolonial



feminism offers valuable insight into the experiences of women in societies undergoing political and cultural transformation.

Theoretical Framework: Postcolonial Feminism

Postcolonial feminism examines the experiences of women within societies shaped by colonial domination and its aftermath. Unlike Western feminist frameworks, which often emphasize universal patterns of gender inequality, postcolonial feminism focuses on the specific historical and cultural conditions that influence women's lives in formerly colonized societies.

One central concept in postcolonial feminist theory is **double marginalization**, which refers to the simultaneous oppression of women through both patriarchal and colonial structures (Ashcroft et al., 2013). Women in postcolonial contexts frequently experience social inequalities that cannot be understood solely through gender analysis.

Gayatri Spivak's influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" highlights the challenges faced by marginalized women in gaining representation within dominant political and cultural discourses (Spivak, 1988). Spivak argues that the voices of subaltern women are often silenced by both colonial authority and patriarchal traditions.

Within the context of Partition literature, postcolonial feminism provides a framework for understanding how women's experiences reflect broader conflicts within society. The violence and displacement associated with Partition reveal how gender intersects with political power and communal identity.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative textual analysis to examine the representation of women in selected short stories by Saadat Hasan Manto. Textual analysis involves close reading of literary texts in order to identify themes, patterns, and symbolic representations.

The selected stories include:

- *License*
- *Black Salwar*
- *Toba Tek Singh*
- *Loosen Up*
- *Black Marginalia*

These stories were chosen because they highlight different aspects of women's experiences in societies shaped by patriarchal norms and political upheaval.

Analysis and Discussion

License

"For eight or ten days, the coach was in the stable, out of work, racking up costs feed on one hand, stable rent on the other. Nesti was in a state of confusion. People were either trying to marry her or rape her or rob her. When she went outside, she was met with ugly stares. One night a neighbor jumped the wall and started making advances towards her. Nesti went half mad wondering what she should do". Pg. 4

Nesti the protagonist of the short story called license was a widow who had lost her husband only after being married for a few months. Nesti had to give her coach to her husband's so called friends but these men were all interested in marrying her so that they could both take over her life and her horse and coach.



She as Manto expresses didn't want to be enslaved by any means and that was too much for a patriarchal society, a women needed a man, that was the way things had been and that is how they liked it. Nesti's being a single women automatically made her available, sometimes in the cover of sympathy, sometimes in the veil of necessity and sometimes through social pressure and blackmailing. so we see that Saadat Hassan Manto really was a man who pointed out that women in a post-colonial era really had no choice but to adhere to the wishes of the society.

"She spent a few days thinking about it. At last she decided to do it. She was confident she could. And so, after asking God's help, she arrived one morning at the stable. When she began harnessing the horse to the carriage, the other coachmen were stupefied; some thought it was a joke and roared with laughter. The older coachmen tried dissuading her, saying it was unseemly". Pg. 5

Nesti in desperate circumstances having run out of all option decides to take the reins of her life in her own hands and started to drive the coach herself, but the men don't take her seriously, they think it is ridiculous. Some laugh at her even though she is pretty confident she can do it. The older coachmen think it is unseemly, implying that she needs a man and doing something by herself would be a matter of shame not just for her but for the entire society. So Manto here shows us how women are bound by unseen chains, and if they try to cut the shackles of cultural and social bondage they are ridiculed and are made social outcasts. This is a perfect example of post-colonial feminism.

"When the work became too much, she had to fix hours for when the coach would go out in the mornings, from seven to twelve; in the afternoons, from two to six. This arrangement proved beneficial as she managed to get enough rest as well. Chinni was happy too, but Nesti couldn't help being aware that her clients often rode in her coach only to be near her. They would make her go aimlessly from pillar to post, sometimes cracking dirty jokes in the back. They spoke to her just to hear the sound of her voice". Pg.5

These lines again shout out feminism, in these lines we see how Nesti is made a victim of abuse, if not molested sexually she is constantly treated as the other, she realizes that men act differently with her then they would with a male coachmen. The fact that they rode aimlessly and made dirty jokes is an indicator of extreme sexual abuse. In today's world we understand why this is abuse but pointing these things out in the lives of powerless women in the immediate post-colonial era shows us how great a feminist Manto was, as these things were considered normal at that time and nobody cared or even thought of such matters.

"Sometimes she felt that though she had not sold herself, people had slyly bought her anyway. She was also aware that all the city's other coachmen thought ill of her". Pg. 5

These lines about Nesti's psychological condition that she feels as if she has bought even though she has never sold herself are such articulately put that there is hardly anyone who would not understand the irony they carry. The idea that a woman is hated for doing a job, by the men who do the same job is also equally ironic. Manto is highlighting here that even the colonized men try to do the same to women and hence they are doubly colonized.

"One morning, the municipal committee men called her in and revoked



her licence. Their reason was that women couldn't drive coaches. Nesti asked, Sir, why can't women drive coaches?

The reply came: They just can't. Your license is revoked.

Nesti said, Sir, then take my horse and coach as well, but please tell me why women can't drive coaches. Women can grind mills and fill their stomachs. Women can carry rubble in baskets on their heads and make a living. Women can work in mines, sifting through pieces of coal to earn their daily bread. Why can't I drive a coach? I know nothing else. The horse and carriage were my husband's, why can't I use them? How will I make ends meet? My Lord, please have mercy. Why do you stop me from hard, honest labor? What am I to do? Tell me". Pg. 5

These lines are like a cracking slash to the sensitive ear, as hear we see that an honest woman is trying to make a living of hard labor and still she is being victimized not just by the ignorant and the uncivilized people of the society but also by the system, which claims to be the caretaker of the people. The law made by men allows women certain roles which are beneficial to them and the rest of the roles are off limits. Nesti's persistent question of "why" to the municipal committee officer is so symbolic, her pleading with him for a reason as to why she can't make use of her own property which is the fundamental right of a human being, her appeal of mercy to have the right to make an honest living is Manto's beautiful way of tearing off the covers of justice and equality and even civilization which a male dominant and colonized society claim.

"The officer replied: Go to the bazaar and find yourself a spot. You're sure to make more that way.

Hearing this, the real Nesti, the person within, was reduced to ashes. Yes sir, she answered softly and left. She sold the horse and carriage for whatever she could get and went straight to Abu's grave. For a moment, she stood next to it in silence. Her eyes were completely dry, like the blaze after a shower, robbing the earth of all its moisture. Her lips parted and she addressed the grave: Abu, your Nesti died today in the committee office.

With this, she went away. The next day she submitted her application. She was given a licence to sell her body". Pg.5- 6

The all-important advice which the officer gives to a woman who worked her way through such troubled time, who did everything she possibly could to save her honor is to go and find a spot in the streets, Manto with his razor sharp wit leaves everyone speechless in this story as Nesti feels that the women inside her, the person inside her has been murdered and she needs to be a prostitute as that is socially acceptable, but her driving a coach is out of the question. On top that we see that the license for hard and honest work was for her impossible to get, but the license to become a prostitute and a commodity was granted to her in one day. Manto through the story of Nesti has shown the world how a post colonial society treats its down trodden and helpless factions of society specially women who are seen as nothing but pieces of a chess which can be moved from one place to the other without any guilt.

Black Salwar

"Of course, what she implied was that she was having a hard time of it, so much so, that sometimes she even found it difficult to procure a decent meal".pg. 11.

In the very beginning of the short story Manto makes the position of the



protagonist Sultana very clear, she is a prostitute who has had very little luck in Delhi, it is amazing to see that women such as Sultana who had broken all the boundaries of social liberties and had compromised everything that a woman holds dear, and yet they had no financial stability, they sold their bodies and still could not fill their most basic human needs. So we see that Manto shows how women have no way to earn a decent meal even if they decide to trade their bodies for it. Hence Manto exposes the condition of desperation that women suffer in colonial society.

“These white soldiers were much nicer than the general run of the locals.

True, they spoke a lingo utterly unintelligible to sultana”.pg. 11.

Here we see again how Manto highlights the double colonization of women, as we see that a prostitute like Sultana is more inclined to have white soldiers as clients than having the local men, this shows that to the colonizer the colonized are genderless so both men and women are treated likewise but the colonized men consider women inferior and so make sure to treat them worse than they are treated by their colonizers. Sultana’s frank comment refers directly to the idea of post- colonial feminism, a theory which became popular in 1970’s but Manto identifies the problem in the late 40’s.

“Of course, he did not give her that extra rupee. But he took from his pocket a shining eight-anna with the Emperor’s face imprinted on it and gave it to Sultana and she meekly accepted it. For her, anything extra was nothing short of a windfall”. pg. 11

Sultana’s financial crises had come to its worst and she is desperate and so needs the money to pay her rent which is way too much for her current financial condition. Her asking this client for money and him giving her only half of that shows that it was really very difficult for women to make ends meet, and symbolically the money that she earned had the emperor’s face printed on it, this implies that the society is so male dominant that a women has absolutely no place in it and unfortunately the men hardly care about what happens to women in the society. But still Sultana’s in her desperation looks at it as a generous gift. Post- colonial feminism is visible in each word of the paragraph.

“While in Kashmir he seduced a girl and eloped with her to Lahore.

Unable to find a job in Lahore, he ultimately forced the girl into prostitution”. pg. 12

These lines have been used for introducing another very important character in the story called Khudabaksh. A man that Sultana is now living with and he serves as a pimp. He is a man who has made a life out of selling women’s bodies and keeping them in the illusion that he loves them. This is important as we see how vulnerable women are in a male dominant society, where if a women has fallen in love with someone she does not have the power to marry him, she needs the consent of her family and if they disagree she has no choice but to elope and that too is just trading one master for another, after she goes with the man she has to do exactly as her new master wishes. A woman’s fate is decided by the men in her life be it her father, her brother or as in this case her lover. So we see she is the slave of the slave, as post- colonial theory suggests.

“The municipality had specially set apart this corner of the city to serve as its red-light district so as to prevent the prostitutes from clandestinely infiltrating into other parts of the city”. pg. 13

These lines are highly ironic as we see that Manto highlights that how one part of the society is considered expendable and kept in one corner of the city which in



this case is a female population, so that men can satisfy their desire in a manner which ironically keeps their women safe from the eyes of any such men as themselves. Then a very important question that this situation raises is the utter and complete hypocrisy of the men of the society, men claim that women in general should be respected specially when we see it in an Indo-Pak context, where religion and culture both insist on the respect for women. But here we see how the idea of respecting all women becomes a matter of choice, so it sort of becomes respecting selected women or one's own women rather than all women. Post-colonial feminism seems to be spot on when it comes to the above mentioned lines.

“Anwari lived above the treadmill which was owned by a seth who had given her a job in his mill. Since the seth had to look after the mill at night he found it convenient to spend the night with Anwari”.pg. 13.

In these lines we see how a women who has taken a leap of faith, by leaving behind everything that she held dear to herself, such as her home, her financial well-being, her friends and all because of her love for a man and the social dependence she feels she has on a man, even if she has to support this man financially. Anwari is a women who has the needs a man in her life just so she can survive the stares and leashes of social dogma. Here we see that men are not very generous in their kindness towards a women who might have something to give them, which in this case we see is the opportunity to exploit a women sexually, by providing her a place to live. The seth in the above mentioned lines is a man who “employs” her to be his mistress. Here we see Manto point out the exploitation of women in two ways one by provision of basic needs and another by psychological and social needs. So we see that Anwari is a slave to both and so is not just double oppressed but triply oppressed.

“No ,my love ,we are not going back to Ambala,”Khudabakhsh said, taking away the bangle from sultana. ”It shall be Dehli and we shall make good here. Your bangles will again come back to you”.pg. 14.

Here again we see the manipulative nature of Khudabakhsh, when he is even if politely and in a loving manner asking Anwari for financial help to the extent that even when her prostitution business isn't working is being asked to part with her jewelry, which it must be remembered she has made by selling herself. Again her dreams of a better life are the tools of the exploitation. Khudabakhsh is portrayed here as a man who can be compared to a leech sucking her dry and who promises her that good times will be back. Here Manto seems to portray a certain amount of naivety in Anwari. So again we see how he portrays men as creatures who manipulate the dreams and ideals of women to make sure that their hegemony remains intact and the women in their naivety consider it love and fail to see the manipulation. **Toba Tek Singh**

“People couldn't make themselves heard at all– and the female lunatics' noise and clamor was something else. And the cold was so fierce that everybody's teeth were chattering”. Pg.6

These lines talk about women who for many reasons have been driven to madness and now they are in a mental asylum, where they have lived for many years, in many cases. These women have made this place their home and now when the Governments of India and Pakistan have decided to distribute the population of the people in mental institutes, these women are forced to leave a country they have always thought of as their own. These crazy women try to present the silence within with the noise that they make on the outside. The



morning of the exchange is complete chaos as they are dragged across the borders for reasons that they don't understand and for things they had left behind a long time ago, so in the midst of all this these women are left no other choice but to protest in the only way they know, which is by acting madder. Manto here shows us that the women are as insignificant as ever for being crazy and being women simultaneously.

Loosen up

“At last, utterly exhausted, Sirajuddin sat down by the side of the camp and tried to recall when and at what point of the journey Sakeena had strayed away from him, while thinking of his daughter his mind got entangled in Sakeena's mother's body whose entrails had spilled out of her stomach and whom he had seen dying before his eyes. “Don't worry about me,” the dying woman had said. “Look after Sakeena. Take her to some safe place.” But where was Sakeena?”pg. 90

Here we see sirajudin a man who in the midst of chaos has lost his only daughter. He when the whole thing is over sits brooding over the events of the day, he has lost his most valuable assets, his wife and his daughter. The helplessness that Manto depicts in his tone and the pain that a woman suffered is an example of his genius as a writer . The writer here highlights, how women were used as atool to inflict a symbolic torture to men. Here we see that even in the middle of such chaos, no man had made it a point to physically hurt another man, they had killed a women in the most brutal and inhumane way and a generally it was the women who had fallen victim to the game of two male groups fighting over superiority. The women were raped and abused, tortured and murdered in the most brutal ways and all this due to the fact that men consider women to be the symbol of their honor and prestige. So here we see that Manto portrays women as not just victims of war but also victims of communal vengeance being carried out by one group of men against another group of men, hence women are again doubly oppressed.

There was nobody in the room. Only a body lay darkly outlined on a stretcher. Sirajuddin warily proceeded towards the stretcher with hesitant steps. Suddenly the room lit up and he saw a girl lying on the stretcher. “Sakeena!” Sirajuddin cried. There was a black spot on her pale face.

“Do you mind throwing open that window?” he said. “Yes open it!”

As the doctor uttered these words, Sakeena's lifeless body suddenly stirred/and her hand limply travelled to her salwar. She loosened up its cord and pushed down her salwar exposing her naked thighs to view.

Old Sirajuddin cried with joy: “She's alive! My daughter is alive!” The doctor trembled from head to foot and sweat broke out on his body”. Pg. 92.

In the above mentioned lines we see how a girl who has been raped and abused in the most inhumane way, not by the enemies but by the volunteers who were supposed to be her saviors and whom she had trusted to be her own. Unfortunately Manto here points out that men, who had been charged with the protection of these women had used them and broken down the trust of the people and had done things that no man will ever do to their worst enemy. The other thing we see in this extract is the complete surrender both physical and psychological, on the part of Sakeena. She has been so abused over and over again that now she has been broken to the bones, both physically and



psychologically. Her complete surrender to the words open it and the way she responds to the request is absolutely robotic in nature and shows how she has been made subservient to the demand, so much so that now she does not have the will and the courage to resist. Here again we see that Manto portrays a woman who is suffering to the extreme at the hands of men and that too not strangers but men she thought were her own, her hope and her way back to a life. The double oppression of women is clearly visible.

Black marginalia

Where ignorance is bliss:

“Two friends carefully selected a girl out of a lot of twenty or so and bought her for forty-two rupees. One of them took her home for the night. After spending the night with her the man asked her name in the morning. The man rushed to his friend’s house. “Those bastards have cheated us!” he cried, “ They have palmed off a girl of our own community on us. Come, let’s go and dump her back on them.” Pg. 48.

This short story by Manto shows several stories in itself and points out the elements of complete breakdown of system, of justice and of humanity. The above mentioned line shows two men who buy a woman for 42 rupees and then spend the night with her in all that time they are not concerned with what they do to this woman as they believe that she is from the other community and so deserves to be treated in any way that they want to treat her. But the discovery which leaves them stunned is that she is not from the other community but is in fact one of their own. All of a sudden the commodity that they had bought becomes a living breathing human being, just because she is from their community, being with her becomes less fun, using her becomes less satisfying and empowering her less superior. These men have been cheated into believing that this woman was the enemy and now they know she is not. Even after the discovery the men are not ashamed or embarrassed or even guilty about the trade they have made, and that the trade included a real person, but the major matter of concern for them is the idea of having bought a woman of their own community. Here again Manto in his brilliant sarcastic manner shows us that women are women, but their worth is decided by their community and their relation to the powerful. So we see that women are suppressed two folds first by being of the weaker sex and the other for being a part of the community which for some may be considered inferior or different.

“Please, please, I beg of you, don’t kill my young daughter before my eyes.”

“well, well, let’s not be hard on him. Let’s accede to his request. Strip the girl and drive her off naked.” Pg. 50

Here in this passage we see the heart wrenching pleadings of a man, who sees his daughter being caught by the raiders and knows for sure that they will kill her and that too in a way which will be impossible for him to witness. The extreme helplessness we are witness to in this regard is so painful and genuine that one cannot help but feel for this father. The father here insists that although he knows his daughter would never be spared so he starts begging not for her life or her security but for the mercy of killing her somewhere, where he does not have to witness what happens to her. Manto here tells us how the raiders show him the mercy, they in their mercy and kindness decide not to kill the girl and so decide on another course of action where they decide to kill her respect and honor and inflict psychological wounds which are no less than murdering her



soul rather than her body. All they can sum up is to strip the girl naked in front of her father and then leave her to run away, so that some other mob gets to finish the job somewhere else and so the father does not witness what happens to her. Manto's ability to show the wickedness that humans are capable of is so sharp and so blunt that he creates physical pain by words. In the above lines Manto shows how men even in the oddest of situations have a camaraderie and respect for each other, we see here that the raiders showed mercy for the father and couldn't find any mercy for the girl, she was hurt in ways which for her might be more painful than being killed. The idea that a woman is always seen in regard to her menfolk whether it is her honor or her life is all too evident in Manto's satire and women's many fold oppression is also quite clear.

Findings and Conclusion

The analysis reveals that women in Manto's stories experience multiple forms of marginalization. Economic hardship, patriarchal norms, and political violence intersect to shape their experiences. These narratives highlight how women's lives are influenced by complex social structures that reinforce inequality.

Saadat Hasan Manto's short stories provide a powerful critique of gender inequality in postcolonial South Asian societies. Through his portrayal of marginalized female characters, Manto exposes the social and cultural structures that contribute to women's oppression.

By examining these narratives through the lens of postcolonial feminism, this study demonstrates that Manto's fiction offers valuable insight into the gendered dimensions of Partition and its aftermath.

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