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## **The Ambivalence of Pleasure in the Saadat Hasan Manto's "Whore/Horror" Stories**

The Bombay fiction of the Urdu writer Saadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955) is typically read through one of two lenses: as social realism, the literary movement that swept through the subcontinent in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; or as pulp fiction and romance. Manto was criticized by social realists for not being true to the movement's dictates, while other readers criticized him for writing what amounts to sensationalism. These critiques focus upon the same figure: the prostitute. But, beyond what the two poles of his reception suggest, Manto's prostitutes demonstrate few of the horrors that a moralistic reading anticipates. They are neither pure symbols of a degrading and inhumane social practice, nor are they wanton, debauched playgirls that serve as mindless titillation for oversexed male readers. They are, rather, sites of ambivalent investigations into the idea of modern pleasure. Manto's prostitutes are iconoclastic and enigmatic. Not always sad when we might expect them to be sad, not always happy when we might expect them to be that, they are curiously difficult to reduce to static, dogmatic tropes.

I would like to break down this characterization of Manto's prostitutes as an intentional class with symbolic value. This has been overstressed through contextualizing Manto alongside the Progressive Writers Association, the social realist movement that defined North Indian letters from its founding in London among South Asian English-language writers in 1933, through its incarnation in its Urdu brand in 1936, and continuing strongly for at least two decades, with an afterlife as a Pakistani literary organization. Manto, I suggest, might profitably be read in a separate context because not

only did he disavow any formal relation to the Progressive Writers Association, he also strived to write real people, not representatives of classes, inasmuch as that is possible.

The great interest that Manto's writing has for many readers today is not simply his historical look at the atrocities of nation-building; but it is also, and perhaps mostly, how Manto understood that an Indian emotional revolution was almost possible, something to match the sexual revolutions of the West and something that would have signified an interesting twist in the history of the senses, emotions, and cognition—in short, affect—in South Asia. His stories can be read as explorations of the possibilities for emotional liberty, of the ambivalent possibilities for pleasure in a new, modern India where the cosmopolitan capital of Bombay offered social conditions that eclipsed what India had known before, and where a re-orientation of the relationship between emotions, the senses (sex included), and pleasure was seemingly quite near at hand.

“Ten Rupees” is in many ways a curious story. Its plot is not complicated, and yet all the reading lenses that we might first like to apply seem somehow inappropriate. The protagonist is Sarita, a fifteen-year-old prostitute. She lives with her mother in a chawl, a type of building built to house textile mill workers. Her father worked for the railroad, a decent, middle-class job, but he was killed in a fight on the train. The backstory of her father suggests that the family was poor and illiterate, but hoping to come up in society: her mother wished for her to marry a “respectable man” (11), and her father harbored serious dreams for his daughter to read. While the situation that led to her father's death isn't fully clear, her father was subjected to insults from his boss, and when those didn't stop, the man stood up for himself, only to be tossed from a train. The government made

the boss pay the family 500 rupees, which at the time would have been a considerable amount for a lower-middle class family, and this suggests that perhaps there had been racial, regional, or caste-based epithets involved. But Sarita's mother wastes the money on gambling, and so now she allows a neighborhood pimp, Kishori, to send Sarita out four or five times a month. Kishori serves as a surrogate, though not protective, father.

This backstory does seem to set up the reading that Priyamvada Gopal announces, that of an “explicitly political stor[y] of exploitation and oppression, degradation of prostitute life [and] patriarchy and the exploitation of women” (91). But the daunting truth of Sarita's narrative is not that. The perplexing matter is that Sarita does not feel degraded, but rather seems quite happy. That is, contrary to all expectation, the refrain of the story. When Sarita's mother tells her that a man has come for her, Sarita is happy to hear this fact: “Sarita was very happy to hear that a rich man with a car had come. She didn't care about the man but she really liked car rides. When she was in a car speeding through the empty streets, the wind whipping over her face, she felt as though she had been transformed into a rampaging whirlwind” (14). True, Sarita's excitement does not have to do with having sex with a man:

She didn't stop to think about what the man would be like or where they would go, but as she quickly changed she hoped that the car ride wouldn't be so short that before she knew it, she would be standing in front of the door to some hotel room where once inside, the john would start drinking and she would begin to feel claustrophobic. She hated those suffocating rooms with their two iron beds on which she could never get a good sleep. (17)

This is, perhaps, the frame that Gopal would point to for her reading. But it isn't the only facet of these outings: “[T]he men would take Sarita off to a hotel or some dark place, and she considered this good entertainment. [S]he imagined that all girls had to go out with rich guys to Worli to sit on cold benches, or to the wet sand of Juhu Beach” (16).

The ambivalence of the experience is marked. She deems it “good entertainment” while referring to those things that constitute its events as something less than pleasant. Regardless of this ambivalence, what does excite her about her work is incontestable, and that is car rides.

In fact, Sarita is obsessed with cars, or not with cars per se, but the feeling they give her of emotional freedom. While the story describes Sarita in general as being “blissfully free from worry”(15) inasmuch as she got two meals a day, the car rides seem to be essential for her conceptualizing of her desires and the future; in short, if, because she is so young and uneducated she cannot articulate a rational plan for the future, she nonetheless can point to the feeling that she wants, and that is the feeling she gets while in cars: “The cool wind rushing over the speeding car soothed her, and she felt fresh and full of energy again. In fact, she could barely contain herself: she began to tap her feet, sway her arms, and drum her fingers as she glanced back and forth at the trees that streamed past the road” (19). The story’s references to this feeling provide the narrative its backbone, its unceasing refrain:

Sarita wanted to get out and sit on the car’s hood next to its iron fixture shaped like a flying bird. (20)

Sarita was in such a good mood that she liked everything she saw. She wanted to believe that even bad things could be redeemed, she wanted the car to continue speeding along, and she wanted everything to fall into the whirlwind. (20)

Sarita kept singing [...] She was very happy [...] (24)

The symbols here are both universal and specific: if a bird’s flight is a quasi-universal symbol of freedom and emotional liberty, and wind, as well, then a car is a resolutely modern sign that represents the same feelings. Singing, moreover, represents emotional liberty and happiness.

In the quotes above, there are two phrases that need further attention, and her interactions with the three young men must be mentioned, as well. These two directions of inquiry center on the relation between cognition and feeling. The exact relation between cognition and feeling stands at the center of debates over the emotions. Looking back to one seminal moment in this ongoing debate, we find in the Scottish Enlightenment the example of David Hume, who, in arguing for the primacy of emotions in motivating the self to act, claims that the two are interconnected in an indelible way. In “A Dissertation on the Passions,” he writes of this as a double relation, “The double relation of ideas and sentiments will be acknowledged incontestable” (146). Hume was arguing against a Cartesian dualism that privileged rational thought, and his own analysis privileges emotions as the primal force behind action: “It seems evident that reason, in a strict sense, as meaning the judgment of truth and falsehood, can never, of itself, be any motive to the will, and can have no influence but so far as it touches some passion or affection” (161). Reason, to Hume, is a “general and calm passion” (161) and not a differentiable species of mental activity. And the passions, the affection, are what lead people to act. Among contemporary writers on the emotions, Martha Nussbaum argues for an enmeshing of cognition and feeling, as well. She writes,

Emotions, I shall argue, involve judgments about important things, judgment in which, appraising an external object as salient for our own well-being, we acknowledge our own neediness and incompleteness before parts of the world that we do not fully control. (19)

She argues that thinking is bound up inextricably in feeling.

Thinking about feelings as being interconnected with thoughts is crucial to understanding Sarita’s experience in this car. The importance here is on how sensual experience leads her to think, leads her to think not only about herself but about the world

at large, about the nature of experience itself. To quote again, she “wanted to believe that even bad things could be redeemed, she wanted the car to continue speeding along” (20). The car is interconnected to this thought; she couldn’t have had the thought—she *doesn’t* have the thought—independent of the sensation the car provides. When she reaches the beach, she runs over the sand, again thinking, just briefly, about life: “ She ran [...] and she wondered what it was she wanted—she wanted to fade into the horizon, dissolve into the water, and soar so high into the sky that the palm trees stood beneath her; she wanted to absorb the sand’s moisture through her feet, and ... and ... the car, the speed, the lash of the rushing air ... she felt transported” (23). Notice how the scene that is in front of her, the beach scene, is in its own way only a metonymy for the fuller experience of freedom that she has experienced in the car; the beach scene dissolves into the car once again. It is the sensation of release that the speeding car provides that serves as a means—or, in Nussbaum’s terminology, an emotional object—for her to experience something, and, through that, think out of the narrow confines of her economically, educationally, and otherwise constricted life.

This brings us to the story’s once seemingly odd, but increasingly understandable, conclusion. Sarita, at the end of her car trip with the three men, gives back to their ringleader, Kifayat, the ten rupees that he has given her. “This money—why should I take it?” (25) she says before setting off for her chawl. Is this simple naivety? Is this a writer’s self-conscious gesture against the newly robust capitalist world? Turning to Nussbaum again provides a different reading. Nussbaum writes that wonder and imaginative games are crucial for children to develop an ability to love others and to express compassion: “Children whose capacity for this response to the world is strengthened through

imaginative play have a more robust capacity for nonpossessive love, and for bringing distant others into their system of goals and plans” (54). This thinking speaks directly to Sarita’s situation. The story describes Sarita’s daily life of play:

All day long she kept busy playing meaningless game with younger girls. For example, she really liked to draw chalk lines on the alley’s black asphalt, and she would play this game with so much concentration that it seemed as though the world would end if those crooked lines weren’t there. Or she would take an old gunnysack from their room and spend hours engrossed with her friends on the footpath—twisting it around, laying it on the pavement, sitting on it, and such childish things. (14-5)

A child is engaged in imaginative play, building a world separate from the real world, an alternative version to what confronts the child as real, and, as such, inevitable. At the story’s end, Sarita is “nonpossessive”: she doesn’t take the money owed to her. And, throughout the story, not only does the narrator remark upon Sarita’s happiness but also on how pleasing her company is for the men. There is no sex; all we see is their happiness, so complete that by the story’s end, two are fast asleep, having been tuckered out by the day’s escapades. We could say that she extends her compassion. If assigning compassion to a mere child seems too far a stretch, then at least we should admit that she has, in Nussbaum’s words, engaged in “bringing distant others into [her] system of goals and plans,” as the “system” in this case is that which begets the sort of emotional liberty she experiences during the car ride. It is as though Sarita’s happiness has spread affectively to them through the air. I don’t think there’s a real alternative reading for this story’s end: everyone is happy; there is no depredation. And when she does return to the aforementioned reality, one that doesn’t seem to offer her a lifetime of pleasure and happiness, this return is the ambivalence that the story poses for us to consider as demonstrable of a certain reality.



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