



A Gendered Reading of the 'Hyphen' in the 'Post-Colonial': Revisiting woman characters in Manto's short stories

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Abstract

Partition literature is widely considered as the first batch of Post-Colonial Literature that the Indian subcontinent has produced. Among its writers, one of the most controversial and distinguished names has been of Sadat Hasan Manto, who wrote on the cusp of Independence and the Partition. Many scholars have credited Manto for always having dared to touch the flame of life with bare fingers, referring to his grotesque realism coupled with sublime humanism. Therefore, in analysing the debatable implications of the 'hyphen' in the word 'Post-Colonial', this paper seeks to examine the female body as the site of socio-cultural inscriptions, even after the 'Colonial' becomes a 'post' phenomenon, through the lens of two distinct women characters by Manto in his short stories. The study makes a qualitative analysis of the characters and attempts to employ it in interpreting the term 'Post-Colonial' while dwelling on the complexity that the hyphen adds to the phrase.

Keywords: Women, Post-Colonial, Partition, Hyphen, Manto.

Why the hyphen? - decoding the 'Post-Colonial'

A hyphen is a punctuation mark, one among the several others that are very commonly used in the English language. It is a short horizontal mark used for attaching or distinguishing between at least two syllables of a word or of a phrase, leaving an imagery of how the word or phrase has been constructed or what is the impact of one particular

syllable or word on the other. It indicates the semantic connection between the premodifying words, grouping these together to ensure unambiguity of expression between the two words or syllables that are parted by the hyphen. (Booth, 2020)

Nonetheless, when a mark of punctuation or linguistics is placed against a complex term or background, it no longer remains just a matter of semantic correlation but leaves the scope for a lot of social- political or cultural interpretation and academic debate, as the existing literature on this area points out.

One such instance is found in the usage and understanding of the term 'Post-Colonial'. Sukalpa Bhattacharya writes, that "... 'Post' signifies 'difference within', of Colonialism itself, to situate alterity and difference within 'Colonialism' itself." (Bhattacharya, 2007). This, unlike is typical of the purpose a hyphen serves, only adds to the ambiguity of the term, raising the primary question as to what timeline or chunk of history or the present, be referred to as the post- colonial, both as a *moment* in time and in historiographies. In this regard, literature and language, as a witness and reaction to every social change and revolutions across ages, again become a credible arena of discussion and contention.

Post-Colonial Literature, or in specific, Partition literature birthing from the Indian subcontinent, became the most convenient way of embracing the powerful and diverse body of literary responses to the challenges presented by decolonization and the transitions to independence and post-independence

in a wide variety of political and cultural contexts. through a representation of the violent happenings of 1947, these texts are a reminder that one is never free from imperial memory. In his book, *Remembering Partition*, Gyanendra Pandey describes Partition as “a moment of rupture and genocidal violence, marking the termination of one regime and the inauguration of two new ones” (Pandey, 2001). The Partition since then has stayed an event of such mammoth impact that all post-colonial as well as modern writers of this subcontinent, have a tendency to go back and visit the “rupture” in order to construct their present, much as if to ignore is the same as ignoring the cultural history of a nation.

Sadat Hasan Manto's gendered perspectives on Partition is immaterial to his writings, filled with a human dimension and empathy so much so that the accounts of women in his works almost seem like a first-hand narration, through the representation of the truth and trauma of the period. Born into a Kashmiri family of Amritsar, his job took him to Lahore, Bombay and Delhi and among these cities he would keep travelling. In his memoir about his friend, he wrote “I found it impossible to decide which of the two countries was now my homeland – India or Pakistan?”, beautifully capturing the chaos of the period.

In the present study, thus, visiting the women characters in two of his short stories, presents an authentic perspective on the outcomes of the partition through modern fiction by projecting the problems of caste and poverty, squalor, prostitution, backwardness, ignorance and superstition bordering the 1940s, adding value to the contention that women become the sites of socio-cultural change in all such situations of crises.

Text and Representation

With deliberate care Manto writes in his candid lyricism, non-fictitious fictions, that comprise of neo-realistic and historical framework although a romantic gloss given to a brutal socio-historical reality. His stories, in a certain similarity with O. Henry's style of writing, characterise an abrupt and an open ended, leaving it on the reader to estimate the implications of the plots and sub plots, usually in addition to a gripping rhetoric.

The first short story that I consider for an analysis is *The Return*. The story opens into an estimable and gruesome scene of ‘special trains’ arriving at much later than scheduled intervals at the Amritsar station, carrying corpses or at best, fully or gravely injured bodies, between Lahore to Amritsar. Having established the background, the following scene shows a father, old, distressed, almost in a daze, like a spec lost in time, who sometimes regains consciousness about the present and frantically calls out his daughter, looking for her through and through the refugee camps, glancing over the trucks that would sometimes arrive with the rescued women and children ‘from the other side’. He would ask every young armed man to

find and bring his daughter back. Recalling his dead wife's face and feeling the dupatta of his daughter crammed inside his trouser pocket, he would tell the men:

“She is fair, very pretty. No, she doesn't look like me, but her mother. About seventeen. Big eyes, black hair, a mole on the left cheek. Find my daughter. May God bless you.”

On their next trip, they even found a girl with a mole on her left cheek who affirmed that she was Sakina, Sirajuddin's daughter. They fed her milk and even offered her a jacket to cover herself up. After many days, Sirajuddin suddenly spotted some action near the railway track; four men were carrying a young woman to the camp hospital. Upon getting closer and switching on the light, the father exclaimed out of joy, “Sakina!” . The body on the stretcher moved slightly, her hands still groping for the shalwar cord which she painfully loosened for the doctor to examine.

“... She is alive. My daughter is alive.”

The father shouted with joy and the doctor broke into a *cold sweat*.

The second short story, though not directly based on the Partition, features two young teens from the two religions, that have their histories so intertwined that it becomes difficult to distinguish where the Hindu-Muslim Communalism starts and where the Hindoo-Musalman brotherhood ends. Of such things such as sentiments and feelings, all the more because these are psychic and emotive, any

comment of precision cannot be made as to how and when exactly did the Communal hatred start brewing but it is true that Communal hatred is one of the hallmarks of the dreary Partition, ipso facto. In this story titled (translated in English) *Two-Nation Theory*, Manto leaves the reader to wonder presupposing that if love unites, what divides. Or, if communalism divides, is inter-religious relationship a sheer display of audacity, or is it a political act?

The story is about a tender, affectionate relationship growing between Mukhtar, son to a wealthy Calcutta businessman, and a studious and artistic Sharda, a girl of not more than sixteen years of age, who would attend her crochet classes in Mukhtar's house, adjacent to where she lived; the only time when they would come face to face with each other. On all other days, they would only steal glances through the eyehole in one of the east windows or have a hurried and shy acknowledgement of each other's presence, when she would fly the kite on the rooftop and Mukhtar, rest on the cot in his courtyard.

Later when Mukhtar expresses his want to marry her, the story takes a predictable but unusual turn. Nonchalantly, having received his father's nod, Mukhtar suggests Sharda to convert to his religion, dreaming of a future together. Sharda innocently reverts to him the same suggestion, their conversation eventually throwing light on the crisis of values that a vivisected India saw:

"...Sharda clenched her lips, as if they were sewn up. Mukhtar looked at her. 'Why have you become quiet?' She said nothing. 'Sharda, tell me what is it?' Mukhtar asked in a worried voice.

With great difficulty, Sharda replied, "You become a Hindu? 'I become a Hindu?' he asked in an astonished voice. Then he laughed. 'How can I become a Hindu?' 'And how can I become a Muslim?' she asked in a low voice. 'Why can't you become a Muslim... I mean you love me. And then Islam is the best of religions. The Hindu religion is no religion. Hindus drink cow urine; they worship idols. I mean it is all right in its place, but it cannot compare with Islam. If you become a Muslim, everything will fall in place.' Sharda's copper face had gone white. "You won't become a Hindu?" Mukhtar laughed, 'Are you mad!' Sharda's face had blanched. 'You should leave. They will be coming about now? She rose from the bed. Mukhtar couldn't understand. 'But Sharda...? 'No, no, please leave, go quickly or they will be here,' she said in a cold, uncaring voice. Mukhtar's throat had gone dry but with great difficulty he said, 'We love each other, Sharda

why are you upset? 'Go, go away, our Hindu religion is very bad; you Muslims are the good ones.? There was hatred in her voice. She went into the other room and shut the door. Mukhtar, his Islam tucked inside his chest, left the house."

Analysing Manto's 'woman'

The first story brings out the indiscriminate forms of gender-based violence, Sakina is raped brutally by men of both sides, her "rescuers" too. This violence that the ethnic genocide witnessed, inflicted on women by men of the opposite religious group, involved kidnapping, rape, and mutilation of the genitalia or public humiliation. The supposed aim of this kind of violence was to abase the men of the rival religion to which the women belonged. Another form of violence against women included the violence inflicted on women by their own family members. This could vary from honour killings to the insistence of male kin that their mothers, daughters, or wives commit suicide in order to safeguard the purity and chastity of the community. Both forms of violence substantiate the claim that women were not treated as humans but rather as markers of communal and national pride by committing various acts of offences on the woman's bodies, through 'Construction of national memories during conflict' (Goodman, 2002), that would ensure that live memories are created by "polluting" the women of the enemy clan. Pondering on a similar notion, Manto writes in *The Dutiful Daughter*:

"It always amused me to see that such enthusiastic efforts were being made to undo the effects of something that had been perpetrated by more or less the same people. Why were they trying to rehabilitate the women who had been raped and taken away when they had let them be raped and taken away in the first place?"

The second story shares a glimpse into the society's expectations from women, wherein her womanhood is perceived less as a matter of biology (except for the understanding that

biologically women are the weaker sex), but rather, as a set of culturally defined characteristics which is overall posited in a male-constructed narrative which is enforced and normalised over a long period of time as traditions, norms, character of an ideal woman, behavioural qualities(patient, tolerant, soft, subservient to the dominant sex, etc).

In his book, *The Second Sex*, Simon De Beauvoir writes, “He (man) is the subject, he is the absolute, she is the *other*...”. And marriage being an institution that can alter the familial community compositions and its nexuses like caste-religion, caste-gender etc, in the long term, explains why inter-community marriages may appear threatening to traditional societies. Further, it points at the society’s refusal to see women as capable of any kind of agency proves that even in their aggression, women are seen as creatures passively succumbing to their fates as sanctioned by the religious community.

Moreover, talking about the period in consideration, one’s identity such as culture, language, local customs, etc. were shrouded by religious megalomania, wherein the idea of ‘home’ itself was already altered, which may have further sparked the insecurities surrounding the same. Manto thus emerges as a social critic and humanist, for having dealt with similar themes in his typical sensibility and realism in his other short stories besides *The Return*, such as *Colder than Ice*, *The Dutiful Daughter*, *Mozail* and *The Woman in the Red Raincoat*.

Conclusion

Woman being central to both *private* spaces and *public* societal structures, starting from the level of the family till the level of the State, naturally assume a significant even during post-conflict restorations. They are also seen as ‘signifiers of religious and cultural ideology and honour where their bodies operate as ethnic or national boundaries’ (Anthias and Davis 1989: 1480). A Foucauldian understanding of the same concept would tell how bodies (of women) are not just biological spectacles but also sites of social inscriptions and social associations. The woman characters in Manto’s stories bring out these subtle details and also provide an insight into the dilemma of the period considered ‘post-colonial’- whereby, ‘post’ marks the departure from what is ‘colonial’ and indicating that there also exists a space beyond; thereby meaning a space that is neither Colonial nor non- colonial; as terms neither together nor separated, yet paradoxically presented as binary opposites of each other as if the ‘post’ must begin from where the ‘colonial’ ends, assuming that history unfolds in a liner ‘pre’ to ‘post’ direction

without remnants from the past. On that ground, the complexities of Manto’s woman characters strengthen the argument that the ‘post’ must carry the baggage from the ‘colonial’ and yet, must keep reinventing herself along ‘modern’ lines rather than existing as the victims or tools of patriarchal power play between two or more groups.

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