



# Understanding the Concepts of Feminism in the Works of Sadat Hassan Manto: A Critical Analysis

Zubia Razeen<sup>1</sup>, Prof. Nishat Arif Hussaini<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Khaja Banda Nawaz University, Kalaburagi, Karnataka, India

<sup>2\*</sup>Dean Faculty of Languages, Arts & Humanities, Sciences, Social Sciences & Law, Khaja Banda Nawaz University, Kalaburagi, Karnataka, India

Received: 28 Apr 2025; Received in revised form: 19 May 2025; Accepted: 25 May 2025; Available online: 31 May 2025  
©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license  
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

**Abstract**— Sadat Hassan Manto is a prominent Urdu-language writer from British India who have worked on emotions, trauma during partition. Manto's work acclaimed for its uncompromising depiction of societal truths, presents a diverse array of female characters that confront the patriarchal conventions and gender disparities that were common throughout his day. This study seeks to reveal the intricate portrayal of women in Manto's stories from a feminist perspective. It will analyze topics such as women's empowerment, strength in the face of adversity, and the examination of patriarchal systems. The study also explores the intricacies of intersectionality in Manto's narratives, analyzing how gender intersects with other social identities such as class, religion, and ethnicity. Further, this study examines the disputes and objections regarding Manto's depiction of women, while also emphasizing his impact on feminist discussions and the enduring significance of his themes in present-day society. This study aims to analyze Manto's writings from a feminist standpoint in order to highlight the lasting importance of his literary heritage in influencing discussions on gender, power, and social justice.

**Keywords**— Sadat Hassan Manto, Feminism, Gender, Social justice, patriarchal systems



## INTRODUCTION

Saadat Hasan Manto is often regarded as the most contentious writer in the Indian subcontinent, with his writings evoking a great response from readers across all social strata. Manto, born in 1912 in the little hamlet of Samrala near Ludhiana in Punjab, demonstrated via his writings at a young age that he would become a highly recognized writer on both sides of the border, and that he should be regarded with utmost seriousness. He has a remarkable ability to reveal the morally rotten nature of the supposedly civilized individuals of his era. He achieved this by his candid and truthful depiction of oppressed, pitiable, feeble, and persecuted characters in his narratives. Despite first penning stories for films in Bombay, he was compelled to leave India for Pakistan in 1948, just one year after the partition based on communal lines. This significant and harrowing event, of which he was a first-hand witness, left an indelible mark on his sensitive psyche. In his writings, he consistently and passionately depicted the gruesome specifics of violence, plunder, sexual assault, and abuse that

occurred during the partition, when a large number of people were forcibly uprooted and forced to travel to the protective and secure areas of those who shared their religious background. The violence portrayed in his books reveals the genuine nature of individuals who have been stigmatized and conceal their true identities. Approximately one million individuals, including men, women, and children, were brutally killed during the slaughter known as 'ethnic cleansing'. This term brings to mind the atrocities committed by Hitler against the Jewish population in his pursuit of racial superiority. Just like in times of war or riots, women were once again subjected to the most horrible crimes perpetrated on them by fanatical bigots.

### Portrayal of women in Manto's stories

Manto's stories are abundant in depictions of lust, desire, and explicit sexual encounters. He skillfully portrays his characters, particularly women, taking into consideration both their physical and spiritual needs, as well as the prevailing social norms and moral standards of the era. Additionally, he masterfully intertwines the contrasting

religious factions of Hindu and Muslim, creating a narrative that explores the conflicts and commonalities between these two opposing groups. To a naive and inexperienced reader, Manto may come out as a voyeuristic writer who derives pleasure from exposing the modesty of women by portraying them solely as objects of sexual gratification. In his stories 'Cold Flesh', 'The insult', 'Janki', 'Mozel', 'The Black Shalwar', 'My Name is Radha', and 'Open it', the author includes explicit content regarding the portrayal of women, which caused significant controversy and drew the attention of both the general public and the authorities. He was accused of pandering to readers' sexual desires and subsequently faced legal charges. In addition, he was criticized for being a literary elitist who openly boasted about his literary expertise. The epitaph on his tomb reads: "Here lies Saadat Hasan Manto, in whose heart are preserved all the secrets and mastery of short story writing." Immersed beneath heaps of soil, he is currently pondering whether he excels more as a short story author or as a deity. On a different occasion, he asserted his status as one of the preeminent short story authors in both India and Pakistan.

#### **Cold flesh**

Manto's narrative 'Cold Flesh' depicts the plight of women who endured sexual assault by members of different communities during the communal turmoil that followed the partition in 1948. Ishwar Singh, the protagonist and one of the rioters, becomes fixated on the consequences of his attempted sexual attack on a young woman. He comes to the realization that the girl is lifeless, her body devoid of warmth. Despite his strong physique, this tragedy rendered him powerless and devoid of vitality, and the image of the deceased girl always torments his conscience. This story is a sharp and nuanced satire that highlights the plight of women. The writer makes a thought-provoking observation that the Muslim girl is spared from being sexually assaulted due to her unfortunate demise. Women lack an independent existence; they exist solely for the purpose of providing comfort to males. Kulwant Kaur, the wife of Ishwar, is furious at her husband's betrayal, as she cannot fathom him engaging in extramarital affairs. The author notes that women are compelled to present themselves as objects of amusement for males throughout their lives. As vulnerable targets, they can only liberate themselves from this torment by death. The story written by Manto effectively captures the shame and powerlessness experienced by women in this society. Ironically, Manto himself was accused of obscenity for penning this story.

#### **The Insult**

This is the tale of a prostitute who supports herself financially and even offers economic assistance to one of her lovers. However, each time this admirer visits, he urges her to quit her profession and promises to send her a money

order that never arrives. One evening, she received a guest and promptly prepared herself before heading out to meet this visitor at the beginning of the path, accompanied by her associate, Ramlal. The guest shuts the car window and departs with a sigh, causing Sugandhi to ponder why she did not feel fond of them. The reason for his refusal to engage in conversation with her and his use of a mere grunt instead of a whole word can be attributed to his lack of interest or willingness. She felt offended and had a strong want to express her anger, but she couldn't because the car is no longer present. Upon her return, she encounters her boyfriend Madhav once more, who requests money from her. However, she firmly refuses his request and instructs him to go instead of remaining. Sugandhi, a kind-hearted and cheerful girl, underwent a dramatic transformation where she started openly insulting others instead of keeping quiet about it. This change occurred after she discovered that she had no control over the individuals that entered her life. In this story he typically portrayed the toughness of a helpless women who does not bother to insult others who tries to bully her.

#### **Janki**

Janki, a young woman with aspirations of becoming an actress, embarks on a journey from Peshawar to Pune based on a recommendation to see a man who could potentially assist her in finding employment opportunities. 'Janki' examines the socialization of women to instinctively submit to the emotional and physical requirements of infantilized men. Janki assumes the role of a romantic partner for numerous men who exploit her to attend to their bodily ailments and emotional requirements. Janki struggles to divide her attention and efforts equally among these guys, finding personal fulfilment in their happiness, until she is exhausted and they no longer require her. 'Janki' is Manto's critique of the societal expectation for women to solely exist for the benefit of males, which is a false belief as it hinders their personal growth and fulfilment.

#### **Mozel**

This is the narrative of a rebellious and independent Jewish girl who embarks on a romantic relationship with a Sikh guy named Trilochan amidst the backdrop of the partition era. Furthermore, it pertains to Mozels' autonomy, courage, and unrestrained longing to pursue her own desires without any restrictions. Movel will evoke a wide range of emotions and conclude in an unexpected manner. This exemplifies a flawless instance of a Manto short story and his investigation into indomitable souls. Interestingly, it is also the only one which presents a utopic vision of a character sacrificing her life for another. We are made to recognize cultural symbolism and difference in this story: "I cannot marry you," says Movel to Tirlochen, because "you are a Sikh." Movel, in her short

hair, ugly lipstick, and frocks that barely hide her nudity, Tirlochen with his long hair, beard and turban, Kirpal Kaur the virtual, virginal, religious Sikh girl—these are all cultural stereotypes. But they are external to the bonds of love and compassion that exist between human beings.

### **The black Shalwar**

The short story narrates the expedition of Sultana. Although she had a consistent clientele and achieved success as a sex worker in Ambala, she decides to relocate to the larger and wealthier city of Delhi with a man named Khuda Baksh. They have high aspirations and actively seek out new opportunities, but unfortunately, things don't unfold as they had anticipated. Manto portrays Sultana as a typical woman who has common worries about finances and lifestyle, as well as her own self-worth and desires. This narrative is intricately crafted, with an ambiguous finish that invites readers to engage in thoughtful discussion. The story shows the pervasive social and cultural hypocrisy that exists in Indian society. The narrative emphasizes the existence of discriminatory practices and biases directed towards women, particularly those employed in the entertainment sector. Shankar, the main character in the narrative, plays a pivotal role in revealing and challenging these biases. He is an impoverished rickshaw puller who becomes enamored with a stunning dancer named Sultana. Regardless of her occupation, Shankar fully embraces her true self and is prepared to enter into matrimony with her. Nevertheless, when Shankar introduces Sultana to his family, they dismiss her due to her occupation, despite the fact that they also go and observe her shows. This exemplifies the hypocrisy and inconsistent standards prevalent in society, as individuals derive pleasure from the artistic displays of dancers and performers, yet simultaneously hold them in contempt. Shankar's involvement is crucial as he embodies the ordinary individual who is not influenced by cultural conventions and biases. He is prepared to embrace Sultana as his spouse, regardless of her occupation, and perceives her as a sentient individual with emotions and sentiments. Manto uses Shankar's personality to challenge the inflexible societal conventions and biases that exist, emphasizing the importance of embracing and showing compassion towards individuals from all backgrounds.

### **My Name is Radha**

'Radha' revolves around a young woman's pursuit of success in the film industry, as she confronts gender-based discrimination and the unjustified idolization of her male co-star, Raj Bhai. This brief narrative gradually intensifies and reaches a climax with an unforeseen conclusion. The conclusion is rooted in Radha's forceful determination to assert her individuality, make her own choices, and resist being confined or categorized. Crucially, Radha's ability to establish her own identity and live

independently is of utmost importance. Each of Manto's stories will provoke inquiries and profound revelations. A notable aspect is that his female protagonists exhibit a striking level of modernity, which is particularly noteworthy. From the beginning, Manto has raised doubts about the character of the Raj. He skillfully guides the audience throughout the entire narrative, gradually unveiling his actual character by stating, "I don't hold much fondness for him." I would prefer to disclose my reasons to you gradually. Finally, when he returned to Neelam's residence. In her own account, she refers to him as "the bastard" and recounts that he scratched at her face. Furthermore, when she passionately kisses him, she describes him as becoming as frigid as a lady who has accepted her destiny. In contrast, Neelam is reflected exactly as it is. Throughout the entire duration, she remains unchanged. She self-identifies as a "fierce woman" and a "jungle cat" or "wild cat". She possesses a distinct and unique personality, but Raj demonstrates hypocritical behavior. He exhibits a duality in his demeanor. The text is a short narrative 'My name Radha' is rich with cultural, religious, literary, and political allusions which once again depicts the feministic approach of Manto.

### **Open it**

Manto's 1948 narrative 'Open it' is a remarkable portrayal of the chaos and destruction that occurred during the Partition. The narrative begins with the following statement: "The exclusive locomotive departed from Amritsar at precisely two o'clock in the afternoon, requiring a duration of eight hours to arrive at Mughalpura." A significant number of passengers were killed on the journey, some had injuries, and a few simply wandered off to unknown destinations. Sirajuddin, the protagonist, is in pursuit of his daughter, Sakina, who was inadvertently abandoned in Amritsar. He requests assistance from a group of eight male individuals in a refugee camp in Pakistan to locate his daughter. Subsequently, the 'social workers' locate her, subject her to sexual assault, and then desert her. She was discovered in an unconscious state in close proximity to the railway tracks and thereafter transported to the refugee camp located in Pakistan. Subsequently, as the doctor examines her pulse and gestures towards the window, he instructs, "Please open it!", Sakina, resembling a bruised creature, loosens her waistline and lowers her salwar. Her narrative is among the several accounts of women who endured the full force of Partition, sacrificing their physical well-being. The act of partition, as experienced by women like Sakina, not only involves the division of land but also results in the physical harm and disfigurement of their bodies. This narrative portrays women helplessness and agony during the partition.

## CONCLUSION

Saadat Hasan Manto's works also highlight how women are treated in the society and the usual happenings that take place among them. Beyond this, however, his writings can be seen to provide valuable insights into feminist discourse. Most of the stories of Manto speaks about women portraits feminism through characters such as Janki, Sugandhi, Mozel, Sultana and Radha. His feminist sensibility can be observed in his writing which involves different themes like violence and sexuality against women and objectification of female bodies that were quite rebellious at that time. Manto always emphasizes the social change, society and gender equality etc.

In conclusion, Saadat Hasan Manto's description of women not only explains his comprehension of human life but also adds the voice of current debates on feminism and gender parity. Manto's work as an author and social critic remains is a hope and rebellion in the midst of the women's struggle for rights and empowerment.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Deka, N. Locating Women in the Patriarchal Society Through the lens of Feminist Theory and Criticism. *SOCIAL ENQUIRY*, 28.
- [2] Ali, S. (2021). Manto and Culture: An Exploration of Cultural Code in Manto's "My Name is Radha". *University of Chitral Journal of Linguistics and Literature*, 5(II), 79-88.
- [3] Gatt, D. (2013). Feministic Concerns through Fleishy Designs: A Revisit to Sadat Hasan Manto's Short Stories. *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, 4(6), 60-68.
- [4] Rumi, R. (2012). Reclaiming Humanity: Women in Manto's Short Stories. *Social Scientist*, 40(11/12), 75-86.
- [5] Ranjan, V. (2018). Empowered at the margins: Women in Manto's stories. *Journal of emerging technologies and innovative research*, 5(6).
- [6] Jalil, R. (2012). Loving progress, liking modernity, hating Manto. *Social Scientist*, 40(11/12), 43-52.
- [7] Mann, H. S. (1998). Woman in Decolonization: The National and Textual Politics of Rape in Saadat Hasan Manto and Mahasweta Devi. *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 33(2), 127-141.