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## Social Commitment and the Writer: A Close Study of Sadat Hasan Manto 'Ten Rupees'

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### ABSTRACT

Sadat Hasan Manto has been one of the most controversial Indo-Pakistani short story writers. Most of his works, set in the backdrop of the traumatic post partition period, revolves around the agony of the struggle for bare living that women endured. Known for his unconventional writing, Manto's realistic sensitive portrayal of prostitution exposes the bestial side of human beings. Though accused of obscenity, his short stories hold a mirror to the greedy and exploitative masculine world. This paper is an attempt to focus on the representation of woman protagonist in his well-known short story, 'Ten Rupees'. The study intends to explore Manto's art of breaking the stereotypical norms about the much-maligned and allegedly the oldest profession of prostitution and the women engaged in it. Subjecting the short story to a close reading, the paper will highlight his bold approach that originates in a writer's social commitment, in engaging with an issue that has either been romanticized or disparaged. The paper will go on to suggest that Manto's deft handling of the theme of prostitution and the women involved in it forces the readers to not only realign their attitudes but also reconsider the exploitative nature of the entire social organization and its manipulative mechanisms.

**Key words:** Saadat Hasan Manto, Prostitution, Prostitutes, Poverty

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Set in the backdrop of the Bombay of 1940s, Saadat Hasan Manto's collection of short stories "The Bombay Stories" can be read as an extremely good example of the use of social realism. Social realism, as a literary genre, as is well documented, emerged out of the Social Realist movement in Europe and America. The movement was primarily a political movement born in the times of global depression of 1920s and 1930s.

Manto has been at the receiving end of certain critics who find him to be indulging in extreme sensationalism. However, in view of this paper Manto's representation of human life and society comes close to Lukacs' idea of realism:

True realism ...depicts man and society as complete entities, instead of showing merely one or the other of their aspects. Measured by this criterion, artistic trends determined by either exclusive introspection or exclusive extraversions equally impoverish and distort reality. (Lukacs 1972:6)

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Manto's depiction of human cruelty, harsh realities of life and prostitution is done in the framework of social and cultural forces that force themselves on human life and behavior. Manto's writings may be viewed as social critiques that bring into sharp focus the lives of prostitutes and prostitution. The paper would like to point out that Manto's prostitutes are neither pure symbols of degradation and inhumane social practice, nor are they wanton, debauched women who serve as recreation for oversexed male readers. Instead they are pictured uniquely as strong and enigmatic women. They are not sad, broken, dejected or cunning when we expect them to be that. Also they cannot be broken down unproblematically as consequences of inhumane acts. I would like to examine the depiction of Sarita – a child prostitute in Manto's short story "Ten Rupees" that appears in the collection *Bombay Stories* to demonstrate the writer's social commitment.

At the outset, I would like to begin with the general stereotypical notions and norms culturally constructed about prostitutes in any given society. More often than not, they are associated with feelings and symbols such as sadness or degraded society, or seen as consequences of inhumane acts, the women are also seen as wanton or debauched women. The short story runs contrary to the expectation that the short story will narrate the sorrowful lives of the prostitutes evoking pity in the readers. The reason being, whether a woman is forced into prostitution (which is the case most of the times) or chooses it willingly, the ultimate destination for them would be nothing more than sorrow filled life. Thus according to the readers sadness is seen as an integral part of a prostitute's life, especially because these women are complicit victims of human trafficking owing to their extreme poverty. It is but natural that these stereotypical ideas about prostitutes elicit sympathy or even the feeling of hatred. But Manto through his short stories like 'Ten Rupees' makes an attempt to break these stereotypes showing them to be strong, respectable women.

"Ten Rupees", originally written in Urdu and later translated into English, introduces the reader to the world of child prostitution. The short story narrates the life and circumstances of a 15 year old girl Sarita who is made to work as a part time prostitute by her mother. The opening lines of the story clearly spell this out when we see the mother who desperately searches for her daughter Sarita. A few lines later, the fifteen year old Sarita reveals that she is being sent out with men three to four times a month by her own mother. This opening very quickly paints an image of Sarita in the minds of the readers. But, the unique feature of the short story lies in the characterization of Sarita.

We gather soon that Sarita lives with her mother in a poor dwelling and that her father had been employed for the railroad, and was killed in a fight on the train. The past details of the family reveal that the family was poor and illiterate, but aspired to come up in society: her mother dreamt that she would marry a "respectable man" and her father harbored serious dreams for his daughter to be educated. While the situation that led to her father's death isn't fully clear, what is clear is that 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. But Sarita's mother wastes the money on gambling, and so now she enlists the assistance of a neighborhood pimp, Kishori, to procure customers for Sarita four or five times a month. Kishori serves as a surrogate, though not protective, father. These details, as can be seen,

have the potential to melodramatize Sarita and her mother's plight. A reductionist reading would immediately seize upon the terms exploitation, oppression, degradation of prostitute life, patriarchy and the objectification of women. However, Sarita's story turns out to be entirely different. The surprising matter is that Sarita does not feel degraded, but rather seems quite happy.

When Sarita's mother tells her that a man has come for her, Sarita is happy to hear this fact. Readers can always see her happy and her happiness is contagious, as we see in the later part of the story:

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. (Manto 2014:14)

Also, Sarita's excitement does not have anything to do with having sex with a man, which exposes her innocence through the lines:

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. (Manto 2014:17)

Sarita considered all these outings to be usual and common to the girls of her age that proves her innocence as can be seen in these lines:

The men would take Sarita off to a hotel or some dark place, and she considered this good entertainment. She 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 (Manto 2014:16)

It is also possible to see the ambivalence of the pleasure here. She considers it "good entertainment" while referring to those things that are even less than pleasant. Regardless of this ambivalence, what does excite her about her work is the car rides. In fact, Sarita is obsessed with cars, because of the feeling they give her of emotional freedom. While the story describes Sarita in general as being blissfully free from worry as she gets two meals a day, the car rides seem to be essential for her desires and the future. Though she is young and uneducated she cannot plan for the future, she can perceive what 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 (Manto 2014:19)

This makes it very clear that all she desired was emotional liberty, which Sarita managed to get even in her extremely deplorable circumstances of serving as a prostitute. It can be noticed that she never blamed her situation; neither is she upset nor depressed about being in prostitution. Instead she is truthful to herself, which makes her happy and strong than being weak and exploited. Throughout the story we can see that Sarita is singing and very happy. The symbols

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

Her interactions with the three young men must be mentioned, as well. Manto has pictured Sarita being friendly with the three men who had actually bought her for the evening in the intention of deriving physical pleasure seem to enjoy her company more as a friend than a pleasure source. This is mainly because of the innocence and happiness of Sarita, that made these boys behave exactly like her, forgetting about the intention with which they actually had visited Bombay. This proves Sarita a unique character breaking the stereotype of a prostitute. We see these men happily singing and drinking with Sarita in the car and sea shore respectively and finally sleep in the back seat of the car satisfied with the company of Sarita as a friend and not as a prostitute. "By the end of the night, Kifayat's two friends are fast asleep in the back of the taxi and no one has physically touched Sarita" (Carole 2014:1). Being so young, Sarita enjoys playing dress up and riding in expensive cars (like most teens do). She's bought by Kifayat, a taxi cab driver, to entertain his two visiting friends. Naturally, he worries about her age and quiet demeanor, but once outside the city, Sarita comes to life: singing, teasing, twisting their hair, and pinching them. One visitor is so enamored he tips her ten rupees beyond the two paid to her pimp. But, at the end of her car trip with the three men, Sarita gives back to their ringleader, Kifayat, the ten rupees that he has given her and says:

"This money—why should I take it?" (Shruthi 2016:1)

This proves Sarita is "non-possessive" about money. She doesn't take the money owed to her as she did not see any valid reason to accept that money as she had just been their friendly company for the car ride and to the beach which had indeed been entertaining to her. And, throughout the story, not only does Manto remark upon Sarita's happiness but also on how pleasing her company is for the men. There is no sex; all we see here is their happiness. Sarita possess the unique characters unlike stereotypical prostitutes, where she is happy, innocent, enjoys emotional liberty and pleasure, at the same time is non-possessive about money. Thus Manto emerges as a writer with social commitment who depicts reality differently but effectively throws light on social evils of poverty and prostitution without degrading women who are engaged in the work of prostitution.

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