

Saadat Hasan Manto's aesthetics: A reading of "Kali Shalwar"

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Abstract

Saadat Hasan Manto has the distinction of much maligned and yet widely read short story writer in the Indian subcontinent. Some of his short stories were even branded lewd and he was considered a reactionary. This debate regarding obscenity and moral concerns has shifted the critical focus away from his aesthetics. The present paper attempts to form a comprehensive view of his aesthetics from a modern philosophical perspective. It uses the idea of aesthetics, as elaborated by Jacques Rancière, in order to undertake a comprehensive analysis of Manto's short story "Kali Shalwar" ("Black Shalwar").

Keywords: Aesthetics, Kali Shalwar

Introduction

Saadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955) has attracted considerable amount of critical attention during his life time as well as posthumously, sometimes for wrong reasons. A few of his stories were banned and he was tried in different courts on various charges against his works, both before and after independence. A substantial amount of debate about Manto's fiction has focussed on moral concerns. This debate has shifted the focus from the aesthetics of his story writing to other issues that are obliquely related to literature. The inadequate attention that has been bestowed upon his art of story writing has remained limited to the subject matter and the use of literary devices in his works. The present paper attempts to examine Manto's aesthetics from a modern philosophical perspective. It uses the idea of aesthetics, as elaborated by Jacques Rancière, in order to undertake a comprehensive analysis of Manto's short story "Kali Shalwar" ("Black Shalwar").

Literature, as we know it today, came into being around the turn of nineteenth century in the 'paradigm shift' affected by early German Romanticism.

In place of a neo-classical poetics of representation, which was comprised of classificatory principles for the division of written works into different genres and sub-genres and which stipulated normative principles for how works in each category should represent their subject-matter, the German early Romantics conceived of an overarching art of writing as such, literature. (Davis 103)

Though the German early Romantics often used words other than 'literature', they intended the new all-embracing concept of literature in absolute sense. The historically specific cultural construct is of importance to Rancière. At the same time, he is interested both in the way in which literature continuous to be haunted by the system which it superseded and in the relationship between literature, what he takes to be the transhistorical practice of writing (*écriture*), and the disturbance which he thinks it engenders in human individuals and communities, a disturbance he terms 'literarity'.

Rancière concludes in *Mute Speech* that it is in the nature of literature, as a 'skeptical art', for its nature to be in doubt, for it to be in question. (167). He argues that the concept of literature is comprised of a set of constitutive contradictions. These

contradictions can, he suggests, be traced back to the moment a little over two centuries ago when the age of literature superseded the age of representation. Rancière is less explicitly concerned with describing the emergence of literature from interconnected social, economic and aesthetic changes over the course of the eighteenth century. He presents a detailed working-through of the relationship between the new principles of literature and the old rules of representation, as well as the consequences of internal contradictions within new principles. Rancière's analysis of the end of representation and the birth of literature takes a very different approach. He states the neo-classical poetic conventions of the age of representation, inherited from Aristotle, according to which the subject of a work of art should be an arrangement of human actions. The language of the work should be appropriate and it should flow from the nature of the human beings represented and the kinds of circumstances in which they find themselves (*Mute speech* 43). There are four main principles of the poetics of representation. The first, established in the first chapter of Aristotle's *Poetics*, is the principle of fiction: a work of art is an imitation, a representation of actions as distinct from actions themselves. Second, the generic principle states that the fiction must conform to a genre. The genre of the work (epic or satire, tragedy or comedy) depends not on a set of formal rules but on the social standing of the characters and the nature of their activities. The third is the principle of decorum or appropriateness, in a specifically social sense. The expectation that character's accomplishments and failures, their qualities and their defects, are suited to their position in social hierarchy and the social contexts in which they find themselves. The fourth and the last is the principle of presence that states the primacy of the speech-act. The poetics of the age of representation is governed by the ideal of spoken word as deed (*Mute speech* 44-48).

The transition from representation to literature constituted a reversal of these four principles of representational poetics. Rancière sums up this reversal in these words:

In opposition to the primacy of fiction, we find the primacy of language. In opposition to its distribution into genres, the antigeneric principle of the equality of all represented subjects. In opposition to the principle of

decorum, the indifference of style with respect to the subject represented. In opposition to the ideal of speech action, the model of writing. (*Mute Speech* 50)

Rancière suggests that in the age of literature, language is liberated from its dependence on the subject and it takes center stage. Language becomes the subject, or matter, of the work rather than merely the transparent medium of reference to a represented subject. The new work of art is a monument in language which is self-sufficient rather than a representation or imitation. It makes no reference to any system specifying the appropriateness of the representation to the subject. The new work of art is built out of ordinary language which, according to new poetics, has no necessary relation to its subject. It is characterized by the independence of style and subject. Thus, the work of art in this age lacks genre as all subjects are equal (*Mute Speech* 33).

A work of literature in the age of new poetics gives same importance to material things and to human beings. In “The Politics of Literature”, Rancière states that such a work disregards any difference between high and low subject matters, any hierarchy between foreground and background, and ultimately between men and things (12). Literature in the new age dismisses any principle of hierarchy among characters and subject matters. It is based on an egalitarian principle that does away with the hierarchical law of the old regime.

In the light of Rancière’s insights into the aesthetics of literature, the present paper examines Manto’s short story “Kali Shalwar” in order to find out if this work belongs to the realm of new literature. The present paper shall focus on the story “Kali Shalwar” (“Black Shalwar”) to examine how the story both conform to and strain against the theoretical framework outlined earlier. It shall critically analyze the story to situate it as a work of literature in the age of new poetics. The story first appeared in the collection entitled *Dhuan (The Smoke)* in 1942. The story dwells upon the social, psychological and religious issues concerning the life of Sultana, a sex worker who has moved from Ambala Cantonment to New Delhi, on the insistence of her partner, Khuda Baksh. She earned well in Ambala where the British soldiers were her regular customers but she faces an economic crunch in Delhi. Sultana is, as the story opens, bored and depressed after three months of practically no business in Delhi. The male clients who visit her in Delhi indulge in bargain before getting her services. She charges ten rupees per visit but none among the first five visitors is ready to pay a penny more than three rupees. Her experience with these customers has such an effect on her that she, at her own, slashes her price to three rupees for the sixth customer (Manto 153).

There arrives a moment of crisis in Sultana’s life when her economic poverty interferes with her religious beliefs and practices. The month of Muharram is approaching near and Sultana needs black clothes to wear on the occasion. She arranges a black *kamees* and a black *dupatta* but lacks a black *shalwar*. She requests Shankar, a man who gets her services free of cost, to get her a black shalwar. Shankar takes her silver earrings and brings a black shalwar for her in return. He has exchanged her earrings for this shalwar with Mukhtar, another sex worker who lives and works in the same building. He acts as a middle man who takes advantage of both the women and gets free sexual favours from both of them in return. On the day of Muharram, Mukhtar, wearing Sultana’s earrings, visits her place. She sees Sultana wearing Mukhtar’s black shalwar. But both the women are reluctant to acknowledge the truth and

pretend as if they are ignorant of the transaction and their consequent exploitation at the hands of Shankar. Thus, the two women face each other as commodities who have been utilized by an opportunist male. At the end of the story, Sultana is well aware of her exploitation but she is clueless about any alternate course that can rescue her from her present state. She has her doubts about her survival in this dreary world where neither *Khuda* (God) nor Khuda Baksh comes to her rescue and offer her any assistance. Her long silence and her forbearance have blunted her ability to speak and have suppressed her spirit of resistance. In a way, by remaining silent, she colludes with her exploiter in the act of exploitation.

The paper examines this story as a work of literature in the age of new poetics. Rancière states that the stuff of the new verbal art is language rather than likeness, the likeness of the work to its represented content, so anything can be the subject of a work of literature. For Rancière, a work of literature in the age of new poetics makes every word equal in the same way and it does away with any notion of hierarchical relationships between high and low subject matters, between narration and description, between foreground and background, or ultimately between people and things. Moreover, it contains a plethora of apparently inconsequential details and unmotivated description of ‘incidental’ objects and organizes the text such that these details, objects and descriptions make an equal claim on the reader’s attention as the characters and the plot. Such a work reflects in its form the absence of hierarchization characteristic of democratic space (“The Politics of Literature” 12).

It is notable that in his selection of a female sex worker as the protagonist of the story, Manto does away with any notion of base and noble subjects. In a number of Manto’s short stories, there is a sense of urgency to voice the concerns of women who have been segregated from the mainstream society. He relates, in his short stories, the life of those women who are consumed like commodities to satisfy the male sexual needs. He represents the fraught and uncertain lives of women who are compelled to remain out of general sight of ‘respectable’ society. These women are physically and socially segregated by the society. They cannot lead a life that is unconditionally available to the ladies and gentlemen of respectable society. As one of the characters in the story “Kali Shalwar” admits that neither of them will ever get married as these conventions are not made for them (Manto 161). The so called ‘respectable’ society does not acknowledge the existence of these sex workers. The ‘long chain of houses’ where Sultana and others of her tribe stay has been designated by the Municipal Committee as ‘Prostitute Quarters’ and the place has been reserved for these women so that they do not establish themselves all over the town (Manto 154). Society has produced the infernal world of flesh trade; it provides full sustenance to it but denies acknowledging the existence of its inhabitants.

Manto’s choice of sex workers as protagonists of his stories earned him the label of “a prince of pornographers” (Sadiq 305). Referring to his choice, Manto observes, “If any mention of a prostitute is obscene then her existence too is obscene. If any mention of her is prohibited, then her profession too should be prohibited” (“Safed Jhoot” 50). He further defends his choice to talk of sex workers in his discursive writing, “We can talk about barbers, washer men, vegetable sellers and inn-keepers. We can tell tales about thieves, petty criminals, dupes.... We can spin yarns about djinns and fairies...why can’t we think of the prostitute? Why can’t we pay attention to

her profession?" ("Safed Jhooth" 50). He declares that a sex worker is a part and product of our society hence a writer can talk about her existence. Manto maintains that the house of a prostitute is like a dead body which society carries on its shoulders. This dead body may be highly decomposed, stinking, terrifying and frightening but it is related to the society and there is no harm in looking at its face ("Safed Jhooth" 50). Manto's choice to make these women the subjects of his stories is a conscious socio-political act of empathy with the down-trodden sections of society who survive on the periphery. The choice of the subject hints at the author's preference to do away with the hierarchization of low and high subjects.

Manto's non-hierarchizing egalitarian fiction is a cluttered space where people and things jostle with each other and the story "Kali Shalwar" provides ample evidence to prove this claim. The author describes the new-fashioned toilet in Sultana's flat in New Delhi in great details. He writes, "In this flat there was a toilet in which, when you pulled a chain the water immediately carried all the filth into the sewer. It made tremendous noise" (Manto 153). He relates her first frightening experience of it:

On the first day, when she went to answer the call of nature in that toilet; she was feeling an acute pain in her back. After getting relieved, she took support of the hanging chain to get up. Noticing the chain, she had thought that since those houses were specially built as dwelling places for people like her, the chain had been fitted out to provide some support so that they did not have any difficulty while getting up. But no sooner had she taken hold of the chain to get up; there was a clanking sound above and all of a sudden water gushed out with such a rush that she shrieked out of fright. (153)

Similarly, the author minutely describes other objects and things in the story. The equipment used by Khuda Baksh for photography such as camera, screen, bottle of hydroquinone and other equipment for developing films have been described in detail (Manto 155). The houses built by the municipal committee for the prostitutes have been described meticulously. The author concentrates on the similar design of buildings and various signboards ("Dirty clothes washed here", "Coal-shop", "Excellent cuisine for gentleman" etc.) that catch reader's attention (Manto 154). The surroundings of the building have been described vividly. There is a warehouse on the other side of the road that stretches from one corner to the other. Big bales along with piles of all sorts of goods lie under the roof on the right side and there lies an open space to the left crisscrossed by innumerable railway lines (Manto 156).

The author's description of the railway tracks, engines and bogies occupies much space in the story. The clattering noise of chugging and puffing engines, as described in the text, appears to make them alive objects that lay equal claim as the human beings of flesh and blood. The engines are personified by the author time and again:

Whenever she woke up early in the morning and came to the balcony, a strange sight was visible. In the misty dawn, thick smoke spewing out of engines would rise upward toward the overcast sky like fat, burly men. Enormous clouds of smoke would rise noisily from the tracks and would dissolve in the air in a blink of eye. Sometimes, when she saw a shunted carriage left to run on its own along a track, she thought of herself. She thought she too had been shunted on the track of life by someone and left

to run on her own; others changed the switches and she kept moving...not knowing where? (Manto 156)

The boundaries between the living and non-living are dissolved by the author. The engines become alive while Sultana starts turning into an object as is visible in these lines, "Whenever iron rails flashed in the sun, she would look at her hands on which the blue veins protruded out just like those tracks" (Manto 156). The metaphor is extended further to blur the distinction between human and non-human,

Sometimes a thought came to her mind that the network of railway tracks that lay in front of her, the steam and smoke rising here and there, was a huge brothel. There were a lot of bogies being shunted hither and thither by a few fat engines. Sometimes Sultana felt that these engines were the *Seths* who used to visit her in Ambala from time to time. And sometimes when she saw a solitary engine passing slowly by a row of carriages, she felt as if a man was looking at the balconies while passing through a brothel (156-57).

The text continually erases the line between living and non-living, between person and things. These things are juxtaposed along with people and are arranged in the text in such a way that these objects make an equal claim on the reader's attention as the characters and plot.

It is noticeable that this juxtaposition of things and people gradually interchanges the foreground and the background of the text. In the beginning, the characters remain in the foreground. The story opens with the details of Sultana's life when she used to live at Ambala Cantonment. There is a detailed account of her profession and her customers. Her customers were mostly the British soldiers and she had picked a few English words and phrases from them. The author writes, "Because of her association with the goras, she had learned a few phrases of English. She did not use these in ordinary conversation but when she came to Delhi and her business failed to pick up; one day she said to her neighbour Tamancha Jan, 'This *lef*, very bad...'" (152). While describing her profession, the author states, "The cantonment goras came to her drunk and within three or four hours she would handle nine or ten of them, making twenty to thirty rupees" (152). But as the story proceeds, Sultana recedes into the background making way for the objects.

The title of the story "Kali Shalwar" itself hints at the prominent position held by objects in the text. This 'kali shalwar' is first mentioned in the story only when the reader is half way through the text. This piece of cloth is, no doubt, of much importance in Sultana's life but at the same time it becomes indispensable for the text. The description of mourning clothes to be worn at the time of Muharram covers at least a space of two paragraphs in the story of a few pages:

The month of Muharram was fast approaching but Sultana had no means of getting black outfit made for her. Mukhtar had a snazzy Lady Hamilton shirt with black georgette sleeves made for her. And to go with it, she had a black satin shalwar which glistened like *kajal*. Anwari had bought a fine silk georgette sari. She had told Sultana that she would wear a white *boski* petticoat beneath it because it was all the rage. To wear with the sari, Anwari had bought dainty black velvet shoes. When Sultana saw all these things she thought that she had no means to buy such clothes for Muharram deeply saddened her. (157)

Slowly and gradually, this object moves to the limelight and Sultana fades in the background. This detailed description of

the object and the importance accorded to it does away with the notion of hierarchical relation between not only the foreground and the background but also narration and description. The description of various objects claims equal space as the narration of Sultana's life story.

The story juxtaposes the pious and the impious by highlighting the religious fervour of the female sex worker. Manto's female sex workers have a remarkable religious inclination, be it Sultana of "Kali Shalwar" or Sugandhi of "Hatak". Religion stands in sharp contrast to unclean, filthy and disrespectful profession of a prostitute. But in Manto's fiction these intermingle and intersect each other in considerable ways. It is noticeable that the opportunist middleman between Sultana and Mukhtar has been named Shankar. Shankar is the name of Lord Shiva. He is the most powerful god of the Hindu pantheon and one of the godheads in Hindu Trinity. Shiva destroys and dissolves everything into nothingness but as Shankar, he also reproduces that which has been destroyed and dissolved. He is considered to be a great ascetic also. Shankar in the story is no ascetic; he indulges in physical pleasures and gets sexual favours from the female sex workers like Sultana and Mukhtar without paying them any money. He can neither create nor destroy. He can only act as a go-between to exchange Sultana's earrings for Mukhtar's shalwar. His existence entirely depends on the needs and requirements of female sex workers.

The story reduces the status of human beings to that of commodities thus bringing them at par with objects. The existence of Sultana and all others of her ilk has been reduced to a mere commodity in the flesh market. The irony is that the female sex workers are both the seller as well as the commodity. It is ironical that she has been named 'Sultana' meaning empress though she is neither the wife of an emperor nor the ruler of any kingdom. The story not only erases the distinction between people and things but also minimizes the division between male and female characters. At the time of Sultana's first encounter with Shankar, Sultana signals him to come upstairs to her place. Shankar's posture is described as, "Shankar sat on the carpet as though Sultana, not he, was the client" (Manto 158). Shankar may not be a prostitute but he surely uses his body as a token of exchange. He provides his services to these female sex workers who are out of business and are hence depressed and bored. He tells Sultana that he never pays for 'wasting time' with female workers but at the same time he says that she can call him whenever she feels necessity (Manto 159). The text, thus, treats male and female characters at par with each other.

It is noticeable that the text does not adhere to the principle of decorum, the principle that applies to all characters and situations, to all their actions and discourses in the age of representation. Sultana's thoughts are unsuitable, as per the principles of representation regime, to her profession and position in the society. She does not think like a female sex worker or, in other words, like an oppressed, exploited, uneducated and down-trodden female in a patriarchal set-up. She reflects upon her life and draws parallels between herself and the trains where engines are identical with the rich clients. Rancière states that the new work of art is built out of ordinary language and language is self-sufficient rather than a representation or imitation. The use of language in the story subverts the positions of dominance and subservience in multiple ways. While describing Sultana's association with the Tommies, the author writes:

These goras were much better as compared to her compatriots. No doubt, they spoke a language which Sultana could not understand, but this ignorance worked to her advantage. If they tried to bargain for a lower rate, she just shook her head and said, 'Sahib, I don't understand what you say.' And if they tried touching and fingering her a little too much, she would break into a round of profanities in her own language. And when they gawked at her nonplussed, she would say to them in her language, 'Sahib, you are a bloody fool, a bastard...understand!' She did not utter these words harshly; rather she spoke to them in a very affectionate tone. The goras would laugh, and they laughed they did look like bloody fools to Sultana. (Manto 152)

The inability of the Tommies to comprehend Sultana's tongue and the use of language by Sultana to her advantage not only flouts authority but also inverts social hierarchies. The narrative subverts various binary pairs such as client-commodity, ruler-ruled, male-female, and British-Indian. The British soldiers are at the receiving end but they are, in a way, too stupid to understand that the female sex worker is swearing at them. The text amply shows the self-sufficiency of language which leads to dissolving of hierarchical divisions.

The story, without doubt, belongs to the aesthetic regime. It can be maintained that in the story, human and non-human not only come together but also exchange their characteristics. A human being in the form of a female sex worker resembles objects, she identifies with trains. Under Manto's pen, the trains come to life and seem to perform human actions. The text is laced with ample evidence to prove its break with the formal rules of representation regime. It is definitely an overturning of order and hierarchy.

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