

**MARGINALISM: SUBVERSION AND RESISTANCE TO POWER IN MANTO'S  
STORY "LICENCE" -- A NEW HISTORICIST PERSPECTIVE**

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**ABSTRACT**

Saadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955) is a legendary Urdu short story writer of the twentieth century. An Indian trapped in Pakistan, Manto was a very controversial writer of his times, who faced many court trials because of his so called 'obscene' expression. But the fact is that Manto analyzed the deep feelings of common men and women and characterized them with most sincere frankness in his writings. In many of his stories Manto depicted woman as the main character. In his stories Manto gives a higher status to certain values and concepts that may roughly be called his vision of life. The humanity that shines through in his writings is a hallmark of his fictional art and his sympathy with the downtrodden living on the fringes of society is an integral part of his vision. This essay makes a critical study of the story "Licence" in a new historicist perspective with the intent of showing how Manto represents marginality and the pervasive ideologies of the Victorian period (sexual restrictiveness) in his fiction.

**Keywords:** power and knowledge, civilizing mission, historicity of texts and textuality of history,

To be at the margins figuratively refers to the individuals who are at the fringes of the society and its power structures with no control whatsoever on their own lives; who have no choice but to follow the dictates of the "political intellectuals" and "law of the land" even if the orders are detrimental to their own wishes. Power is a system of relations spread throughout the society, rather than between the oppressed and the oppressor. Foucault states that where there is power there is resistance. Where there is no resistance, there is no power relation. Manto relates the narrative of opposing colonialism and its dogma with the narrative of resisting power structures of male-dominated civilization. Thus, he makes his interference with the province of history by inquiring and challenging the acknowledged versions, through his fiction because he discovers that behind them there are deeper constitutions of patriarchy,

which restrain women's liberty and smother their voice. It is viewed through Foucauldian power relation theory.

Through the new historicist reading of "Licence", this paper analyzes how Manto represents the pervasive ideologies of the Victorian period (sexual restrictiveness) and how his text resists as well as subverts these ideologies and how he criticized the dominant political ideas by means of these subversions. In this process, the historical context constructed in *Codes of Misconduct: Regulating Prostitution in Late Colonial Bombay* (2009) by historian Ashwini Tambe, has been made use of to observe the disparity and similarity between Manto's stories and the historical documents of same epoch, for the book is based on a review of police records, prison testimonies and statement, government records and census data over a period of eighty years.

The greater part of the critical commentary on Manto's writing has unwaveringly focused on Partition (a political event) and Prostitution (a social phenomenon). In Manto's stories, the people who suffer are generally people on the margins of society in terms of their gender, class and profession. A Subaltern perspective is very pronounced in Manto's stories as his characters are drawn from real life. They are commoners – many of them from lower strata of society – who suffer the fate of decisions taken by leaders and those in the upper echelons of power.

Throughout the Victorian period, colonial authority was largely premised on an ideology of the civilizing mission. Colonial administrators sought to maintain their moral and intellectual authority through a discourse of civilizational superiority. They justified colonial rule using a spatialized narrative of historical progress that fixed different parts of the world on a single hierarchical scale (McClintock 1995). One plank of this discourse was a hierarchizing of nations according to the status of their women. The colonial state presented itself as a representative of an advanced civilization that would introduce the upliftment of Indian women from centuries of suffering (Tambe 13). The British spent a lot of time talking about their civilizing mission, in fact, they ultimately did very little, in pretext, citing respect for local traditions. The entire colonial mission brought the two patriarchal forces, the native elite and the colonial rulers, in a head-on confrontation mainly for political legitimacy in an environment of growing Indian Nationalism. "Everyone agreed that the English should not use their position as rulers to interfere with the religion of the people" (Mason 108).

During the first half of twentieth century, “the colonial state solidified male dominance by granting male legislators the power to speak on behalf of women of their communities. Effectively, this move located women much more deeply within community structures; their identities were reified along religious and caste lines. Indian male legislators (whose numbers in the Central Legislative Assembly increased in the 1920s) wielded a dubious authority when speaking in the name of “their” women” (Tambe 8). Women were doubly marginalized first as woman and secondly as a part of the lower class woman. These two traits together left them powerless in the 20th century colonial India. Manto’s story “Licence” displays this dubious authority [of influential nationalist middle class] and how the needs and voices of actual women were often of secondary interest to legislators.

Manto skillfully exposes, how cultural norms exploits and subjugates the subaltern groups including women and creates multiple marginalizations when it exploits women of low caste because they are most vulnerable to be exploited easily. In *Why I Write* Manto states: “A man remains a man no matter how poor his conduct. A woman, even if she were to deviate for one instance, from the role given to her by men, is branded a whore” (Patel: 156).

In “Licence” Manto appears to be consciously unconscious in order to conceal his identity under the coverings of his ideologies and the presence of certain ideologies again reveal that the author is influenced by his own cultural conditions and that he also knows the role he plays is not of a social reformer but just to give the hint to the readers that there exists an intimate relationship between caste, culture and prostitution that reinforces the structured and hierarchic power-relations which are the reflections of dominant patriarchal discourse of colonial India.

Women in India increasingly became direct objects of colonial law. In the story “Licence”, however independent the protagonist Nesti may be, she is still defeated by the official view on the role of women. The colonial society binds women in all forms of rights and the same happened with the protagonist Nesti, her licence of driving coach was grabbed because she was women. The story “Licence” follows life of sixteen year old Nesti, a cobbler’s daughter, who falls in love with Abbu, the Coachman. Both get married and live a happy life. A cobbler by caste which ranks low in the caste hierarchy Nesti’s suffering begins when one day the police come to their house. Abbu is charged with abducting Nesti and is sent to the prison. She makes continuous struggle for her right. She protests defending her

husband's innocence but in spite of that Abu is sentenced to two years imprisonment. Nesti destiny has to face many blows. Dino her husband's friend drives coach on rent and gives her five rupees per day. But unfortunately her miseries rise when her husband Abu dies of tuberculosis in the prison hospital. After the death of Abu, her problems of livelihood start. Dino changes his attitude toward Nesti. He offers her marriage proposal but she refuses. In reaction Dino gives her less money and makes lame excuses like sluggish of business. "People were either trying to marry her or rape her or rob her. When she went outside she was met with ugly stares. One night a neighbour jumped the wall and advanced towards her. Nesti went half mad wondering what she should do" (85).

Many unsolicited hands come forward to exploit her in the guise of helping her out. Finally standing up to her needs, she decides to earn her bread by driving the coach herself. Seeing a woman driving the coach, the passengers and other coachmen try to abuse her with lustful comments and motions. It is always much unbearable for male authority that a woman can become independent and earn money.

"One morning, the municipal committee men called her in and revoked her licence. Their reason was that women couldn't drive coaches. Nesti asked, "Sir why can't women drive coaches?" The reply came: "They just can't. Your licence is revoked." (87)

The municipal committee grabs her licence and on the basis of socially sanctioned gender roles her licence is withdrawn. According to the municipal committee a woman cannot drive chariot besides male. When Nesti asks the Committee officer, "Why can't I drive a coach I know nothing else. The horse and carriage were my husband's, why can't I use them? How will I make my ends meet? Milord, please have mercy. Why do u stop me from hard, honest labour? What am I to do? Tell me'. The officer replies: "Go to the bazaar and find yourself a spot. You're sure to make more that way." (87)

The Committee office had no solid reason for revoking her licence rather it exhorts her to sit in a brothel (kotha), that way she could indeed gain more. "She sold the horse and carriage for whatever she could get and went straight to Abu's grave.....Her lips parted and she addressed the grave, 'Abu, your Nesti died today in the committee office'. With this, she went away. The Law of the land, thus acts as an instrument of exploitation. The next day she submitted her application. She was given a licence to sell her body' (88).

A broadly Foucauldian framework is used to explain the transition that took place in 1930s during the realms of colonial governance. It is not just disciplinary surveillance but governmental regulation that brings practices of prostitution within the remit of State consideration. The reader has drawn upon Foucault to suggest that metropolitan sexualities in cities like Delhi, Bombay and Lahore were informed by imperial circuit of power and identity, others have sought to examine the sexual politics of colonialist in the periphery. Locating sex and sexuality in relations of power and knowledge, this study extends, develops and compliments the analyses of modes of objectification and “the way a human being turns him or herself into a subject”.

In the story, the municipal committee officer or for that matter his office can well be interpreted as a Foucauldian version of the panopticon prison i.e., the all-seeing surveillance and discourse as illustrated in his seminal work *Discipline and Punish*. And, needless to say, in this power/knowledge paradigm, Nesti becomes the victim of double marginalisation, first to the State and second to the patriarchy represented both by municipal committee officer and Dino. This exposes the reality of the society of that time when there were different standards for male and female. Nesti cannot get a licence to ride a Tonga but easily gets a licence to sell her body. A cobbler by caste which ranks low in the caste hierarchy, the intersectionality of gender and caste is also important in her subordination. The climax of the story also offers a comment on the patriarchal set-up in which women, especially women of lower caste, have no place.

While Abolitionist and anti-trafficking fervor consumed many legislators in Britain, British colonial administrators in India resisted its tenets, citing respect for local tradition. Contrary to its presumed civilizing mission, then, the colonial government institutionalized the very practices that it was called on to decry by Victorian ideologies. And rather than expressing a Victorian sexual restrictiveness, colonial prostitution laws expressed the pornographic imagination of the state. (Tambe xxiv)

Historian Ashwini Tambe writes: “...middle class women became active participants in Indian nationalistic politics during the 1920’s, forming organizations such as the Women’s Indian Association, All India Women’s Conference (1926) and the National Council of Women in India (1925), which enthusiastically took up prostitution reforms as one of its causes” (104). Women’s organizations in this period took positions that in many ways echoed the nationalist approach to prostitution. The central legislative of India in 1928

enacted the law, Abolition of Devadasi system (1929) for the degenerated system of Devadasis (temple girls). The Bombay legislature also passed a legal enactment to stop the immoral practice of prostitution through Bombay Prevention of Prostitution Act (XI & XII) 1923 and 1930. In this coalescing nationalist world view, the nation's honor was predicated upon the desexualized representation of its women (Kumar 1994).

With this social milieu and various legal preventive enactments, yet Manto's protagonist, Neti was denied a driving licence by the authorities to ride her husband's Tonga. This exposes the social reality of that time, the hypocrisy of the nationalist politics and colonial officials' reformatory measures. Nationalism located its own women, in the spiritual domain of culture, where it considered itself superior to the west and hence undominated and sovereign. It could not permit an encroachment by the colonial power in that domain. Therefore, in the specific case of reforming the lives of women, consequently, the nationalist position was firmly based on the premise that this was an area where the nation was acting on its own, outside the purview of the guidance and intervention of the colonial state. These lower class women probably do not figure in the great myth of the nation that is proclaimed from official quarters. Following the manner in which laws were executed then, Manto's stories allow us to understand better the heterogeneity and limits of empire and allows the readers to see how laws could be appropriated in unexpected ways by the local nationalist elites.

By reading these "documents and narratives," "Periodicals and Committee Reports" side by side with the short fiction of Manto's one can understand the new historicist stand, that is, "a reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and textuality of history", as Louise Montrose's oft-quoted phrase goes. By contending that written history has "hidden" the truths about the "other", Manto's short stories makes a contrapuntal reading of the nationalist cause working behind the great trauma of 1947 to replicate the power dynamics of the colonial era.

Here Montrose's approach to text should be recalled. He shows, in his new historicist work how one text jars against another, producing the possibility, and explores the extents to which discourses of power are always shifting, insecure and rife with tensions. In this respect, it can be said that Manto's views of British administration and his characterization of representatives of colonialism "civilizing mission" [as a representative of an advanced civilization that would introduce laws to liberate Indian women from centuries of thralldom]

are different from that of representation of facts in the text *Codes of Miscoduct: Regulating Prostitution in Late Colonial Bombay* (2009) by Ashwani Tambe.

Neeti, the protagonist, does not fit into the colonialist discourse. Manto is not interested in exploring the reasons why women become prostitutes. For him, it is never a question of obscenity, but of circumstances and struggles. The fact is that the reasons are hidden behind the ideologies which provide operative force to the society and the nation which Manto skillfully exposes in his stories like “Licence”, “Siraj”, “The Room with the Bright Light”, “A Girl from Delhi” and “Mummy”. This substantiates M.H. Abram’s Statement that suggests, New Historicists are greatly influenced by such theorists as Ronald Barthes and Michel Foucault who ascribe significance to text which is discursive in nature and denies the presence of ‘empirical self’ of the author but at the same time cannot dismiss the ‘implied self’ of the author. Ronald Barthes informs that “author cannot come back into text [,] . . . he can only do so as guest” (Das 107). It suffices the notion that a writer appears in his writing as disguised in his ideologies which gets manifested unconsciously in the text (Das 2007). In this story Manto’s resentment of colonial rule is discernible in the background. Thus, a complete suppression of the self is not possible, because the author is a sensible and sensitive intellectual of the society. To conclude, through new historicist reading of the “License”, the reader shows how Manto represents the pervasive ideologies of the Victorian period (sexual restrictiveness) and how his text resists as well as subverts these ideologies and criticized the dominant political ideas by means of these subversions.

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