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**TRACING THE FATE OF COURTESANS DURING THE INDIAN PARTITION
THROUGH MANTO'S A GIRL FROM DELHI**

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Abstract:

Leslie Flemming's 'kind-hearted terrorist', Saadat Hasan Manto, is one of the pioneers of the short story genre with a special focus on the "human frailties flickering both in the pimp who goes out selling in the streets and the body of an exploited woman, and in that woman herself" (Haq 2012). The paper explores Manto's A Girl from Delhi and the plight of Nasim Akhtar, a courtesan from Delhi, who had escaped India seeking shelter in Pakistan during the Indian partition. It thereby seeks to understand the hollowness of the nationalist promises of freedom and portrays how marginalized and socially ousted prostitutes and courtesans did not fit into the nationalistic understanding of 'womanhood'; being hypocritically shunned for a 'profession' that was often not the result of an individual choice but the repressive ideology of state forces that govern and control women's lives.

Keywords: *Nautch Girls, Everyday practice, Indian Partition, Kotha, Hira Mandi, etc.*

"I am not seditious. I do not want to stir up people's ideas and feelings. If I take off the blouse of culture and society, then it is naked. I do not try to put clothes back on, because that is not my job" - Saadat Hasan Manto

The multiple forms of gendered atrocities and sexual violence committed against South Asian women at a time when the two nation-states of India and Pakistan were solidifying their own identities ironically deprived the so-called 'fairer sex' of their own, reducing their being to mere patriarchal properties and communal objects. Located at this critical juncture of history, that is the Indian partition of 1947, Saadat Hasan Manto's stories encapsulate this havoc, that destroyed the lives of millions, through the eyes of the downtrodden and marginalized especially beggars, pimps, prostitutes, and others. *A Girl from Delhi* serves as a poignant example of the aftermath of partition wherein the protagonist, Nasim Akhtar is pushed into prostitution, her original trade when in Delhi, against her wishes of settling into the socially coded domestic life of a housewife, after reaching Pakistan from India. My paper examines the condition of those women who were shunned from recognition even by mainstream feminism that is the urban prostitute, and examines how Manto draws a clear connection between the failed universe of these women to the hypocrisy of patriarchal ideology and the failure of the grand scheme of recovery and rehabilitation of women post-Partition.



No Respite in Hindustan or Pakistan: The Courtesan, the Community, and the Sense of National Belonging:

Between 1947-48, following the partition of India and Pakistan around ten to fifteen million people were displaced from their roots (George 135) while most experts currently accept that approximately 1 million died in the partition violence (Partition of India). *A Girl from Delhi* by Saadat Hasan Manto highlights this by beginning with a poignant scenario wherein the narrator encapsulates the bloodshed by stating “India had been partitioned, but the bloodletting continued: Hindus killing Muslims, Muslims killing Hindus” (Manto, *A Girl*, 94). The story’s onset with such a drastic scenario comprises of two important aspects. Firstly, it reveals how this had led the young ‘nautch girl’, named Nasim Akhtar, from Delhi’s courtesan corners, to request her mother, ‘burri baiji’ to seek shelter in Pakistan which was comprised of Muslim majority as India was soon “going to be a Hindu raj” (Manto, *A Girl*, 94). Added to this, it was also mentioned by her that Jinnah had got them their ‘own’ country. Moreover, Mando, their musician stated that if he were to die in Pakistan then his soul would be forever at peace (Manto, *A Girl*, 94). It is to be noted here that Hindus and Muslims had co-existed for hundreds of years in the Indian sub-continent but the drastic change in the mindset of the common folk, resulting from the compartmentalization of people into religious categories by the British, questions the relation between religion, nationalism, and death. Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* argued that “nationalist imagining . . . (has) a strong affinity with religious imagining” concerning the fact that both of these aspects can bestow meaning and continuity into death and fatality; and secondly, the same also prepares people to sacrifice themselves for these invented nations, thereby drawing the cultural roots of nationalism with death (10). However, Kavita Daiya reveals that as per the unofficial narratives that were recorded of the events of the 1947 Indian partition, “the nation did not demand self-sacrifice so much as it demanded and permitted killing (of)...those who were deemed “other” to it according to religion” (71). In 1947– 8 a person’s very demeanour came to be read as Hindu or Muslim (Pandey, 133). This articulation further complicates the relationship between death, gendered violence, and nationalism.

Secondly, the fear that Nasim expressed may also be coupled with the illusionary hope that was carved by the upper echelons of power regarding the possibility of a new life of freedom and respectability in the new land of Pakistan, with one’s own religious majority. This illusion was partly broken by burri baiji who informed Nasim that most of their patrons and clients were Hindus including her admirers and that Muslims had nothing to offer her, thereby in turn revealing, that this shrewd businesswoman could not be fooled by dominant religious and nationalist discourse. Hence, she sent a message to Seth Gobind Prakash, one of their rich patrons, to relieve Nasim of her dilemma and even asked the latter to send some guards outside their kotha for protection as they prepared for Naseem’s mujra performance and hospitality towards the Seth that evening. However, the preparations for the same were thwarted last minute by the news of the murder of a Muslim street vendor by stabbing. This led Nasim to be frozen in fear against Ustad Achhan Khan’s efforts to reassure her. Even her mother did not pay any heed to this and dismissed the murder as a trivial event of everyday life. This, however, led to a confrontation between the two courtesans with Nasim stating fervently that no one can make any sense of anything “these days” when her mother had



accused her of being insensible due to the shocked caused by an innocent person's death (Manto, *A Girl*, 96). In *Remembering Partition* Gyanendra Pandey states a case regarding how a Muslim girl was killed by Sikhs on their road to Qarol Bagh after deliberating for a few days regarding what to do with her, thereby blurring the lines between Manto's fiction and the Partition's reality. Pandey explains this "incomprehensibility" to be the consequence of "the breakdown of all inherited senses of community" (184). This aspect is highlighted in Manto's story when in the very next scene of *A Girl from Delhi* it is seen that the armed guards that Seth Gobind was supposed to send turned out to be "goondas." These men were thought to be their benefactors and protectors by Nasim's courtesan mother however all her expectations were broken when they staunchly replied to the latter "We don't want you, you old hag. We have come for the young one" (Manto, *A Girl*, 97). Manto portrays how the Seth had pretended to act out of a sense of honour in his message to the old courtesan but by this time he had already been consumed by bestial violence in concurrence with the physical and psychological degradation during the Partition frenzy. As Ustad Achhan Khan overheard this conversation, he went on to warn Nasim and escape along with her, leaving burri bai to her fate as he remarked "God will protect her, but we should escape while there is time..." (Manto, *A Girl*, 97). The hint of irony in the statement further imbues this short story with a sense of uncertainty. This proves that although burri bai was able to perceive the chaotic upheaval of the partition with a clear perspective, she was helpless against the larger forces that had already set to motion the cycle of violence and destruction, thereby becoming symbolic of the author himself who had constantly expressed his anger and frustration regarding the same. As per Alok Bhalla writers such as Manto, "record with shock as people in an obscene world become either predators or victims, as they either decide to participate gleefully in murder and loot or find themselves unable to do anything but scream with pain as they are stabbed and burnt or raped again and again" (qtd. in George 143). The old-world order of harmony and community died with Burri bai as Nasim escaped with Ustad Achhan Khan on a refugee train to Lahore, Pakistan. They sought shelter in a refugee camp for a few weeks, surviving by selling off Nasim's jewellery and then after the Ustad was able to rent a kotha in "Hira Mandi, Lahore's famous 'red light' courtesan district" (Manto, *A Girl*, 98).

The next scene unravels how Nasim, despite Achhan Khan's urges to stay in her trade, gives up on her vocation as a dancing girl and decides to settle as a 'normal' woman, even with a desire to get married if possible. She believed that since she had arrived in Pakistan for a new life leaving Delhi far behind, she could quit on her past as a courtesan and live off comfortably. Nasim's actions also prove contradictory of Veena Talwar Oldenberg's claim of the courtesans being undeniably rebellious to the housewifely stage, the only "stage of life" implicitly mandated for all women in both Hindu and Islamic cultural systems (278). Her beliefs, in fact, prove to be in line with the patriarchal ideology regarding the respect offered to a domestic housebound female and also adheres to nationalist discourse formulating the figure of the woman as a symbol of 'national honour' meant to be protected. Her decision led her to lead a "hard life" however, as per Manto, that was "what she wanted." She had also become very religious, praying five times a day and practicing all the regulations during Ramadan including abstaining from drinks and meals (Manto, *A Girl*, 98). Under the circumstances to which Nasim came into Pakistan, leaving behind her life as a nautch girl as well as the old



Burri baiji to her fate, such a conversion also becomes symbolic of the everyday tactic for resisting the historical effects of Partition that she might have had to face otherwise which includes the horrors of rape, murder, and betrayal by her patrons while these acts also helped her in acquiescing socio-cultural sanction. By the application of Michel de Certeau's notion of everyday practice, one can easily identify these as Nasim's own set of practices made up of tactics that reappropriate the dominating, colonizing context. However, this new life that she created for herself as a marker of her 'freedom' was soon threatened by the arrival of Jannatey, "a procuress who enticed young girls and sold them into prostitution. If they had a talent for song and dance, they became rich courtesans; otherwise they became part of Hira Mandi's infamous flesh trade" (Manto, *A Girl*, 99). One day Nasim was singing unconsciously to herself as she bathed. When Jannatey heard her singing, through her experience, she understood that this quiet girl from Delhi could become one of the most famous singing girls of Lahore. This instance of singing therefore becomes important as it reveals how for those "who travelled across newly drawn borderlines, old attachments could not be submerged into...the newly born independent nation" (George, 140). However, all of Jannatey's attempts to convince the young girl failed. When Nasim expressed her desire to get married to any simple man who agreed to her proposal, Jannatey conspired, using this idea, as the perfect method to sell her off to Hira Mandi and planned her wedding to a man who was her accomplice. Nasim was accordingly married, however, her happiness was torn to shreds when she discovered that her husband, the very next day, was haggling over her price with two old courtesans with Jannatey as the mediator (Manto, *A Girl*, 100). This scenario serves as a direct comment by Manto upon the hollowness of the nationalist-religious discourse as the readers witness the dreams of Nasim and the promises of home, marriage and a respectable life in Pakistan turn to nothing but a sham, as there too, people scheme, to force her into the courtesan corners (Siddiqui, 25). After drying off her tears, she escaped once again into the familiar space of the kotha where Ustad Achhan Khan was employed. This last scene proves the hypocrisy of religious, social, and sexual norms that stand under the garb of an illusion of a new life in a newly formed nation. The very people who should have been her saviour and help her secure her future, were the ones to push her into her past.

Sukrita Paul Kumar comments regarding the condition of prostitutes and their trade: "They live in an infernal underworld, invisible to the respectable society which pretends ignorance of its existence. Ironically, not only has it produced this world, it also provides it full sustenance. Its hypocritical indifference to such a world is not just a quiet consent to its existence. In fact, it is due to the vested interests of patriarchal society that prostitution survives because it does not seem to threaten any of its fundamental principles" (156). Manto has highlighted such a fact in his famous story titled *Babu Gopi Nath*. Herein the readers witness Babu Gopi Nath the protagonist of this tale, who was a spendthrift and had paid immense amounts for the deflowering ritual of courtesans in Lahore, ironically finding peace in only two places that include the kothas of prostitutes and the shrines of saints. This is revealed through his dictum that both the places are an illusion: "...in a kotha parents prostitute their daughters and in shrines men prostitute their God" (Manto, *Kingdom's End*, 217-18). His attempts to sell off Zeenat, the former courtesan, to a rich man due to his belief in Zeenat's naivety and wifely nature was another facet of exploitation. Zeenat was forced to sell



herself at every aspect including to Babu Gopi Nath's friends when he was away, even though it was revealed earlier that when she was on her own, she would rather sell off her jewellery for sustenance than carry on prostitution. In another story titled *License* the protagonist Niyati, a widowed woman belonging to the lowest of castes in the hierarchy, was not allowed to sustain her livelihood by pulling a tonga, as her license for the same was nabbed, solely because she was a woman. Ironically, she could procure a license to make a living by selling her body. Niyati's fate or fate was subverted by the law of the land forcing her into prostitution. The 'body' of the woman thus becomes a chief signifier of her identity- local, national, and religious, but in case of prostitution, the same emerges as the source of irony, under the garb of free choice. Likewise, the perpetrators go unpunished. This in turn proves how women from such marginalized sections often find themselves at the receiving end of the stick. Prostitutes stand symbolic of the hypocrisy of a system that on one hand propagates the narrative of ideal womanhood fit in the roles of the mother, the wife, or the daughter and even the silent suffering figure of the widow however, when this very woman attempts to bring a change and hold the ropes of her own life, she faces numerous adversities on her path including repressive state forces like the police or the army, or groups like landlords that have the power to sanction institutional rape that cages her forever. The Partition was a moment of upheaval and chaos that bounded men and women into two categories: the rapists and the raped, the victims and the perpetrators, but at the same time failed to account for the exploitation of women who were already suffering under institutionalized rape meted out by prostitution and socially-sanctioned violation of bodily autonomy and rights. The Partition did offer women like Nasim to lead an illusionary new life however, as Manto reveals in an unhinged manner, this mirage only lasted a short while, as for triply marginalized victims like her no land can offer her respite be it Hindustan or Pakistan.

To conclude, Saadat Hasan Manto lived and wrote during one of the most tumultuous periods of Indian history with his stories encapsulating the horror and raw emotions of the victims of the Indian partition, especially of those who were marginalized and silenced even after the 'rehabilitation' programme. His characters emerging from the lowest strata of society often find themselves outside the officially recorded data, in the dark 'otherized' space that a patriarchal society attempts to cover up to protect its 'izzat'. This highlights the plight of Nautch girls such as Nasim who at once evoke two radically different emotions, firstly their legacy of having rich patronage under the Nawabs and landlords and attachments to the very roots of Indian culture, and secondly their downfall and ultimate fate of being pushed into prostitution against their own will. When India was divided, the attack was not only on an individual's identity but their entire being, belonging to one country and culture, of which courtesans were an important part. The heinous crimes committed against women during the partition take into account mostly the mainstream society, women who stayed within the boundaries of patriarchy and were representatives of the 'honour' of the household. The question still remains regarding women who were never a part of this space, and yet suffered violently due to the same solely because of the repressive and oppressive belief of being 'prostitutes' and courtesans out of their own accord.



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