

Obscene and Perverse Fictions: Saadat Hasan Manto and Censorship

Monalisa Jha

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Lady Brabourne College

Kolkata, West Bengal, India

Mail id: monalisajha81@gmail.com | Orcid - [0009-0001-3703-1471](https://orcid.org/0009-0001-3703-1471)

Abstract

This paper aims to explore how Saadat Hasan Manto, (1912-1955) faced state censorship and social criticism on charges of obscenity and sedition for his stories. The present paper shall seek to trace the charges of obscenity that were laid in colonial India and Pakistan against these stories, in order to trace the national/cultural imaginary through which the nation states of British India and the newly formed state of Pakistan sought to define themselves, to attempt to identify precisely what was found to be threatening in these texts to merit state censorship. The paper asserts that a study of these censorship trials might throw an interesting light on how the South Asian state in its precolonial and then national form imagined itself into being by containing and censoring what was seen as inhospitable to the creation of the governable subject.

Keywords: *Censorship, Obscenity, Sedition, Perversity, Subjectivity*

Introduction

Saadat Hasan Manto is perhaps the most well-known and controversial figure in the history of Urdu literature which flowered between 1930-1950 in late colonial India, and independent India and Pakistan. He was tried for obscenity six times; thrice before 1947 in colonial India, for his short stories *Dhuan*, *Boo* and *Kali Shalwar*, and thrice after independence in Pakistan, for *Thanda Gosht*, *Khol Do* and *Upar, Neeche aur Darmiyan*. Manto's stories explore sexuality through the marginalised, the outliers of society who are not granted legitimacy or autonomy by the machinery of governmentality of the nation state.

Foucault in what have been termed his 'governmentality lectures', delivered in 1977-78 as lectures on *Security, Territory, Population* introduces the concept of governmentality which has been used by postcolonial scholars to explore the political systems of the colonial and post-colonial nation states. Deanna Heath and Stephen Legg in their introduction to *South Asian Governmentalities* understand Foucault's concept of governmentality as emerging in systems that combined sovereign, disciplinary and governmental powers to ensure legalised behaviour and to discipline and manage subjects (Legg 1). An analysis of Manto's stories and the censorship narratives Manto was embroiled in from the perspective of governmentality reveal how the efforts to police the stories were part of a larger political project or form of bio-power to exercise control over the public sphere by the

state, as well as the non-party social movements which emerged in colonial and postcolonial India and Pakistan.

A substantial amount of research on South Asian colonial histories observes how the structures of censorship shift from eighteenth and nineteenth century Britain to twentieth century India and locates the cause of this in the obsession with, and prohibition of what was perceived as obscene in the Victorian moral strictures put in place by the imperial state. The first obscenity statute was passed in India in 1856, a year before it was passed in Britain. Heath reports that from the mid-nineteenth century civil society in India, missionaries, social organisations, nationalists and hygiene groups, put pressure on the government to regularise and police obscenity in the social sphere (Heath 161).

It was, however, the Indian elite, and not the British colonisers who transformed the colonial obscenity laws into a 'biopolitical project'. The censorship trials faced by Manto, might in Foucauldian terms, be then seen as a 'governmentalising project'. Alan Hunt defines a 'project' as governmental processes and practices directed towards the control of civic social life (Hunt 26). All such projects are constituted by the agents who exercise state or voluntary control, targets who may be individuals or social groups, techniques in the form of law or texts prescribing certain kinds of behaviour, governmental discourse in the form of policy documents, and a political paradigm within the context of which these regulatory apparatuses operate (Hunt 28).

In this context, it is interesting that while the obscenity charges brought against Manto were ostensibly to police the sexual content of his writing, thus contributing to the fashioning of a sanitised moral subject, a closer reading of the trials and the texts reveal that the regulatory panopticon in the case of these stories also sought to fix and discipline the unruly subjectivities which did not or could not be commensurate with the new allegories of ideal citizenship being upheld by the elite public sphere. Manto's subjects are those who have been abandoned or left behind by the narratives of progress or development. They lack the safety nets of social security or financial stability, and one suspects it is their class and caste affiliations which render them unpalatable or 'obscene' rather than merely the depictions of sexuality in the texts.

Dhuan is the title story of Manto's third collection of short stories which was published from Delhi in 1941. It is an account of the sexual coming of age of a young boy. In a society which at best ignored and at worst actively suppressed the idea of adolescent sexuality, where discussion of sexuality was regarded as unclean and outside the realm of the polite public sphere, Manto boldly traces the sexual awakening of twelve-year-old Masud, as he sees smoke rising from the freshly cut goat meat in the bazaar, and then thinks of his sister's limbs as akin to the meat as he massages her legs. The prepubescent confusion of the young boy at this sudden attraction towards the physical, the quickening of his body and flesh before sexual awakening has fully occurred have been evocatively depicted in the story. But one may well understand the bourgeoisie moral policing and middle-class squeamishness of colonial India which found such a frank account of sexual awakening so disturbing and 'obscene'. One can see that Manto, even this early in his career, had a penchant for articulating the inarticulable, and voicing what lies hidden in the silences of polite civil society. Manto's preoccupation with the carnal is scarcely about mere erotic pleasure. Here the references to Masood's sexual confusion are an attempt to explore adolescent sexuality and capture the experience through a psychosexual lens. The creation of the bourgeoisie subject requires the disciplining and policing of adolescent

sexuality in order to create a socially acceptable sexuality governed by sociocultural repression. Manto's story in its refusal to cater to the repressive mode threatens the strictures and structures of the conventional social sphere.

Similarly, Sultana in *Kali Shalwar* is a sex worker who has shifted from Ambala to Delhi at the behest of her lover/pimp Khudabaksh. To relieve her ennui, she calls in the stranger Shankar, who asserts he is just like her. Shankar brings Sultana the coveted black shalwar to be worn for Muharram in exchange for sexual favours, and also in exchange of her silver ear drops, which he has gifted to her friend Mukhtar. Sultana's geographical displacement from Ambala to the urban ghetto of Delhi has affected her business, and also her social life. She lives in a flat in a row of buildings which look identical to each other, and which have been provided by the state to house, control and contain prostitutes. In an attempt to construct what Stephen Legg calls a "sexually civil city" (Legg 42), a hierarchical infrastructure was put in place, which banned the prostitutes to the outskirts of Delhi, by providing government constructed housing for them there. This points to how the colonial government was increasingly taking on the mantle of protector of morals in a civil society, as opposed to being concerned with political governance alone. It is Manto's insistence on focussing on these marginalised, excluded peoples, and humanising what was regarded as the 'other', which probably led to an obscenity trial against *Kali Shalwar*. The real obscenity which remains unarticulated in the trial, which supposedly addresses the immorality and vulgarity of the text, is Manto's audacity in forcing civil society to come face to face with its own hypocrisies.

In an upending of the romantic notion of the lovers exchanging gifts a la O Henry's *The Gift of the Magi*, the only thing possible in Sultana's world is a trading of the flesh in exchange for goods or money. No higher sentiment or religious piety may be allowed to the figure of the prostitute. Sultana and her friends in being abandoned by the civil society and also the state have lost recourse to fundamental rights such as expectations of fairness, justice or dignity. This is amply clear to Shankar, who sees Sultana's and Mukhtar's asking for a gift not as a beloved's romantic gesture, but as simply a demand in exchange for sexual favours, a demand which he fulfils by giving each lady what she desires by taking it from her friend. Manto's text is unsettling and 'obscene' precisely because it reveals the uncomfortable truth of how the state and society choose to dehumanise and then abandon the sex worker, metaphorically and literally, by putting them in ghettos outside the city of Delhi. Legg calls this 'civil abandonment': "The abandonment of Delhi's prostitutes was specifically gendered and sexualized, within contexts of both imperial and Indian reformist stigmatization of prostitutes, which increasingly worked to portray the prostitute as the outsider within. The prostitute in interwar India threatened not only British soldiers with venereal disease, but also the emergent nationalism with a radically "other" negotiation of the gendered division of public/private space, that is, the prostitute/brothel rather than the mother/home" (Legg 51)

Manto's story indirectly addresses the hypocrisy and unfairness of sociopolitical and cultural structures which dehumanize the prostitute and put her in a situation which is always already precarious and uncertain. However, as this truth is too dangerous to be articulated, state censorship seeks to ban the text on the pretext of its shunning of the mores of bourgeois respectability. The trial of *Boo* can also be traced to its politically uncomfortable subject. The trial has been reported by Ismat Chughtai in her memoir *Kagazi hai Pahraian*, as both Chughtai and Manto were being tried for their stories *Lihaaf*, and *Boo* respectively. In the combined obscenity trial (1944-46) held at Lahore High Court, evidence of textual obscenity was presented by the

witnesses by picking up words like 'breasts' which appear in the story. But as A. Aftab has rightly pointed out, both stories "sketch deeply the subaltern body whose articulation--or disarticulation--was considered unpalatable and threatening to the newly emerging nation-state." (Aftab, 29) Randhir is an upper caste Hindu man and a womaniser. He usually seduces Christian women, because he finds they are easier to court than Hindu girls. But as Christian women are currently unavailable and involved with the white soldiers in the time of war, he spots a young lower caste woman standing below a tree who he calls inside his house. This one encounter seems to haunt Randhir, as the stench of the 'ghatan' woman's sweat seems to pervade his senses. The story shifts to another day, when Randhir's upper caste fair bride lies next to him. For the life of him he cannot evoke a comparable passion for this woman as for the 'ghatan'. While the story has been praised for its upending of the romantic aura associated with a fair skinned woman, thus subverting conventional romantic ideas, and while Manto has been compared to D.H Lawrence for his frank portrayal of the sexed body, (Basu 1) what is interesting is that *Boo* was first tried in court on charges of sedition rather than obscenity. (Waheed, 127) Its portrayal of Christian women as being sexually available was taken as a slur against the Women's Auxiliary Corps of the British Indian Army, which was comprised of mostly Anglo-Indian Christian women. It was only later that the charge was shifted to obscenity, in an attempt the colonial state made at moral policing, in keeping with the desires of colonial India's increasingly squeamish middle classes.

Although Waheed asserts that the story "in some respects, reinforces a widespread cultural trope in India about the sexually exotic tribal woman who is at once earthy and magnetic in some otherworldly way", (Waheed 131) one must remember that the classist and casteist gaze in the story is of its protagonist Randhir's and not Manto's. Randhir as a womaniser repeatedly objectifies women in the story, whether they be Christian, or 'ghatan', or even his own bride. His attraction for the tribal woman may be seen as an attraction in Randhir's case for what is deemed impermissible and socially forbidden. While the woman is given no name, and her point of view is never put forward, except for the sudden shame in her eyes before disrobing, this is because for Randhir she is no more than an object of desire, not an autonomous subject in her own right. The charge of obscenity against the story is not ultimately about its sexual frankness, but its laying bare of the fissures of caste and class, which had hitherto remained unarticulated and inarticulable in colonial India. In the absence of a vocabulary through which the issue of cast could be addressed, the lawyers acting for the state in the trial point to the sexual connotations of words, objecting to the use of 'breasts', and other words denoting the body or the sexual act.

Thanda Gosht, *Khol Do* and *Upar*, *Neeche aur Darmiyan* were the three stories which faced trial after 1947 in the newly created state of Pakistan. *Thanda Gosht* and *Khol Do* are among the finest of Manto's partition stories. Both focus on the plight of helpless young women and make an attempt to record the unprecedented cruelty of the sexual violence which is one of the most unpalatable and heinous facts of the partition of colonial India into the nation states of India and Pakistan. Here too, Manto refuses to adhere to easy classifications of us/them. In *Thanda Gosht*, a sardar confesses to how in his state of violent lustfulness, he had ended up raping the corpse of a young Muslim girl, not realising that she had died. *Khol Do* ends with the image of an almost dead girl, who automatically loosen her salwar when she hears the words 'khol do', as a result of the repeated rapes which she has suffered at the hands of the volunteers who were supposed to be her protectors. The censorship of these stories is not on the grounds of titillating the senses, but due to the need of the new nation state to fashion an imagined history for itself

which would be built on the erasures and silences necessitated to carve a glorious national allegory. Manto was tried in 1950 in Lahore under charges of obscenity, where obscenity in section 292 of the Pakistan Penal Code is defined as any violation of 'modesty' or chastity'. Censorship was thus carried out to bring into being an ideal modern Islamic state, buttressed by a pure, hygienic and sanitised sociocultural milieu (Ahmed 41). In other words, these trials were an attempt to use the law to police the boundaries of representations of the partition. As the partition of pre independent India into the nation states of India and Pakistan saw unprecedented violence across national borders, writers from India and Pakistan recorded in fiction the mass upheaval and violent chaos for which scant archival records exist.

That Manto was seriously concerned about how the new nation of Pakistan would shape itself is clear from his preface to his volume of short stories *Yazid*, published in 1951: "How would the new cultural and social atmosphere nurture our thoughts and feelings? What would be the relationship between the state, government, community and the individual? These were issues that we needed to seriously concentrate on." (7) The question of utmost importance in the Pakistan public sphere seemed to be how one imagines a future after witnessing the carnage of partition. Ali sees Manto's post partition stories as resisting a monolithic, unilateral fashioning of the new nation in terms of a moral community of Islamic South Asian solidarity. Manto's partition stories can thus be read as representing his ambivalence and uncertainty about the consolidation of a unitary identity in the Pakistani state. (Ali 20) Manto resists through his stories the avowal of any single South Asian Muslim identity to be protected under the guardianship of the Pakistani state. His partition stories thus explore the fissures, dichotomies, frictions in the conceptions of the singular citizen subject who was the product and creation of the homogenising nationalist narrative of the State of Pakistan.

In attempting to regulate representations which did not tow the national narrative, the state and civil society were choosing to elide over representations which did not fit neatly into the pro/anti categories of the newly independent nation state.

Upar, Neeche aur Darmiyan is a playful story which explores the sexual squeamishness of the bourgeois middle classes. What Manto wishes to assert is that "performances of politeness were a farce that either hid one's indiscretions or were demonstrative of social distancing, the antithesis of intimacy." (Waheed 107) Manto gives his own accounts of his court trials in essays, including "Pānchvāñ Muqaddama", "Lazzat-e Sang" and "Zahmat-e Mehr-e Darakhshāñ," all of which were written and published in Pakistan.

Manto was accused of obscenity not only in legal trials but also by his peers. Sajjad Zaheer, a founding member of the Communist Party of Pakistan, and a part of the Progressive Writers' Movement in India and Pakistan, commented on the story "Bu": "The portrayal of the sexual perversion of a self-indulgent member of the middle-class, however realistic, is a waste of time of both writers as well as readers." (Zaheer 252) It is obvious that Zaheer chooses to respond to the sexual descriptions in the story, rather than to the nuanced expression of the dual cast/gender dynamic. In mid twentieth century India, caste discrimination was a proverbial 'elephant in the room', which was denied visibility or legitimacy or voice as being an issue. Manto's attempt to boldly address this, however, remained unmarked, as "Bu" was repeatedly denigrated on grounds of obscenity.

Calling works of literature obscene effectively ensured their being taken out of circulation through a form of social or cultural censorship. Ali argues that progressives sought to tame the conditions of the debates regarding what should the new state of Pakistan be like according to their own vision of a more egalitarian future. In doing so they used the trope of sexual deviancy to curb the chaos that they thought would ensue from “nonprogressive” literature. (Ali 20) For the communist and Marxist social formations in Pakistan, any ideology which was not based on notions of class solidarity was ‘nonprogressive’. Much as the Islamic state, these communist formations wished to curb the multiplicity and jouissance of the social, to replace it with simplistic and misleading versions of the ideal subject of the nation state. In this rationally controlled and unitarian, homogeneous, morally ordered world view, there would be no dissent or ambivalence. In its efforts to organise and discipline the social within neatly constructed binaries of pure/perverse, the state and its contingent formations sought the assistance of censorship machineries associated with the courts and the legal systems in place which had been carried over from colonial regimes of governance. Both in colonial India and postcolonial Pakistan, the machinery of censorship worked as a discursive system to police, repress and contain alterity and non-normative ways of being and thinking. Manto’s stories, in imagining the political and the social in ways which were not ideologically sanctioned by elite civil society or the state subverted and countered majoritarian narratives of progress and development.

In Foucauldian terms, censorship practices on grounds of obscenity function as a ‘norm’, i.e. as normal and normalising. Simply put, norms encourage subjects to perform in strictly prescriptive ways in order to be recognised as normal subjects. (Taylor 47) Taylor argues that certain practices become ‘normal’, and inevitable, immune to critical analysis, when by sheer repetition their arbitrariness becomes invisible. Thus, obscenity proceedings may be said to depend upon a set of nebulously perceived assumptions which are granted the stature of universal truth value. The norm of ‘purity’ functions to produce docile bodies and situate subjects in a web of disciplinary and bio power, locating them in a graded hierarchy of legitimate subjectivities on the one hand, and deviant or perverse bodies, delegated to the sphere of the ‘abnormal’ Anything labelled as ‘obscene’ then carries significations of undesirability, sickness and fruitlessness. When the ‘obscene’ is ahistorically and uncritically accepted as deserving censorship, without interrogating, contextualising and historicising the social and political regimentation which defines and decides what is labelled as obscene, the emancipatory potential and agency of non-normative counter-discourses lose their relevance and power as sites of resistance and reformation. Manto in his stories acts the part of the Foucauldian intellectual, “turning himself into the relay of local struggles”, (Artieres 224) peopling his stories with prostitutes, pimps, oversexed adolescents and the poor and the marginalised.

Thus while the attempts to censor Manto’s stories were ostensibly on grounds of their ‘obscenity’, a close reading of the stories themselves and the trials reveal that the motivation for censorship in these cases was rather the desire to preserve a status quo, to fashion a world view which would elide over the more complex nuances of the lived experience of the common man to replace it with a more sanitised, unproblematised official version; dismissing the stories under the guise of obscenity, or limiting their circulation through legal or social censorship served to mark them as being merely sexually titillating, while suppressing their subversive and liberatory agency. This is what Manto seeks to challenge as he tests the limits of what is permissible and impermissible speech and as he establishes himself as a litterateur and

intellectual who is not afraid to destabilise culturally available notions of propriety while fostering new ways of thinking about power and privilege.

References

- Aftab, Aqdas. "The Sexual Subaltern in Court: The Queer and Inter-Caste Obscenities of Ismat Chughtai's 'Lihaaf' and Saadat Hasan Manto's 'Boo'." *Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies* 7.1 (2019): 1-29. *Gale Academic One File*. Web. 26 June 2024.
- Ahmed, Ishtiaq. "The Pakistan Utopia: Censorship Policies of an Ideological State" *Bayan: Seasons of Silence*. 6 (2021): 25-44. Print.
- Ali Asdar Kamran. "Progressives and Perverts: Partition Stories and Pakistan's Future". *Social Text* 29.3 (2011): 1-29. *read.dukepress.edu*. Web. 26 June 2024.
- Artieres Phillippe. "The Intellectual". *The Cambridge Foucault Lexicon* eds Leonard, Lawler, John Nale. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 224-225. Print.
- Basu, D. A. "Subversion of Romance in Saadat Hasan Manto's Bu". *Contemporary Literary Review India* 2.3(2018):1-7. *literaryjournal.in*. Web. 26 June 2024.
- Heath, Deana. *Purifying Empire: Obscenity and the Politics of Moral Regulation in Britain, India and Australia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Print.
- Hunt, Alan. *Governing Morals; A Social History of Moral Regulation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. Print. Legg, Stephen. *Prostitution and the Ends of Empire: Scale, Governmentalities and Interwar India*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014. Print.
- Legg Stephen, and Diana Heath, editors. *South Asian Governmentalities: Michel Foucault and the Question of Postcolonial Orderings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Print.
- Taylor, Diana. "Normativity and Normalization". *Foucault Studies* 7 (2009):45-63. *CBS Open Journals*. Web. 24 June 2024.
- Waheed, Fatima Sarah. *Hidden Histories of Pakistan: Censorship, Literature and Secular Nationalism in Late Colonial India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. Print.
- Zaheer, Sajjad. *The Light: The History of the Movement for Progressive Literature in the IndoPakistan Subcontinent: A Translation of Roshnai*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Print.

Author Bio-

Ms. Monalisa Jha is currently working as an Assistant Professor in English at Lady Brabourne College, Kolkata. Her areas of interest include Autobiography Studies, Gender Studies, Contemporary Indian Writing in English, American Literature, Partition Literature and Myth Studies.