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Exploring Margins of Society: Representation of Prostitution in Select Short Stories from South Asia

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Abstract:

Despite its historical and cultural significance in South Asia, Prostitution is frequently denied recognition as a legitimate profession due to its deep ties to social stigma and marginalization. Prostitution, grounded in traditions like the *Tawaif* and *Devadasi* civilizations, previously had a crucial function in classical art, dance, and social activities, including the struggle for independence. Nonetheless, colonial governance and cultural changes reconfigured these positions, relegating prostitutes to the periphery of society. This research paper analyses selected South Asian short stories to explore the intricate depiction of prostitutes and their relationship with issues of gender inequality, socio-economic oppression, and cultural identity. The study examines works like Krishan Chander's "A Letter from a Tawaif" (India), Saadat Hasan Manto's "Siraj" (Pakistan), Selina Hossain's "Akali's Life at the Station" (Bangladesh), and Gopal Bahadur Malla 'Gothale's "What Are You Doing Shobha?" (Nepal). By deconstructing the marginalized identities of sex workers and analyzing the similarities and differences in these narratives, this paper seeks to illuminate the complexities of prostitution and its representation in South Asian short stories. It also addresses broader questions about societal margins and the struggle for dignity and agency, offering a comparative perspective on how diverse cultural and socio-political contexts shape these narratives and how the phallogocentric approach of our society puts sex workers and their existence on the margins with zero scope of their discourse in the center of the society.

Keywords: Marginalisation, partition, phallogentrism, post-colonial, prostitution.

Prostitution as a profession has always been a subject of shame and humiliation; it is not even considered a profession. People in this profession have always been treated with judgemental eyes and attitudes. Even with an artistic history of classical art and dance forms, numerous films and literary works have preserved the essence and impartial image of prostitution in ancient times, as well as how prostitutes participated in the freedom cause. Numerous authors have contributed to and chronicled the lives of prostitutes, including Mirza Hadi Ruswa's well-known novel *Umrao Jan Ada*, which is the most notable illustration of courtesan culture. Not only the courtesan culture but the Devdasi culture is also associated with the roots of commercial sex due to society and colonial rule, which made the courtesan culture into a dancing girl. R K Narayana touched the cultural identity of Devdasis and temple dancers through the character of Rosie in *The Guide*. The lives of prostitutes have often been relegated to the peripherals of societal discourse, marked by stigma and marginalization. Literature, however, provides a powerful medium to explore the nuanced realities of these individuals, capturing their struggles, resilience, and humanity. In the context of South Asia, short stories offer a compelling lens through which to examine the socio-cultural and economic forces that shape the lives of prostitutes. This research paper delves into select South Asian short stories to analyze the portrayal of prostitution and its intersection with themes such as gender inequality, class oppression, and the quest for agency. This study intends to shed light on the nuanced aspects of prostitution, dispel common misconceptions, and advance knowledge of marginalized lives within the sociopolitical context of the region by examining the narratives written by South Asian authors. This essay will explore a few short stories from a few South Asian nations: "A Letter From A Tawaif" (Ek Tawaif Ka Khat) by Indian author Krishan Chander, "Siraj" by Sadat Hasan Manto of Pakistan, "Akali's Life at the Station" (Akalir Stationer Jeeban) by Selina Hossain of Bangladesh, and "What Are You Doing Shobha" (Ke Gareki Shobha) by Nepalese author Gopal Bahadur Malla 'Gothale.' This paper will analyze these short stories to explore and deconstruct the marginalized and subaltern identity of sex workers and how different perspectives of select South Asian writers have similarities and dissimilarities. Through the discussion, the paper will try to examine the profession of prostitution and its representation in Select South Asian Short Stories, which will address the question of how margins of society operate and struggle to get a respectable and neutral place in society and how different standpoints of writers represent this discourse in their short stories.

There are fewer number of writers and academicians who wrote about prostitution, be it fictional or non-fictional works. Prostitution as a theme in South Asian short stories provides a lens to examine the intersection of morality, socio-economic conditions, gender, and cultural stigma. Writers across India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal have explored this subject with sensitivity, often challenging societal norms while offering profound insights into the lives of sex workers. This review delves into notable short stories addressing this theme, shedding light on their narratives, characters, and socio-cultural commentaries. Sr. Miranda Divya examined gender-based violence during communal riots and the Partition of India and Pakistan in her paper, “Gendered Violence during India's Partition: A Study of Saadat Hasan Manto’s “Thanda Gosht” and “Khol Do” and Krishan Chander’s “Aik Tawaif ka Khat Pandit Nehru aur Quaid-e-Azam Jinnah ke Naam.” Saadat Hasan Manto’s short stories have always been a subject of intellectual discourse; consequently, many researchers worked on his short stories. In his paper “Feministic Concerns through Fleshy Designs: A Revisit to Saadat Hasan Manto's Short Stories,” Dr. Dashrath Gatt, an assistant professor of English, wrote the title. Sudha Tiwari discussed the memories of partition in her paper, “Memories of Partition: Revisiting Saadat Hasan Manto.” In her paper “Endangered Femininity and the Theme of Motherhood in Selina Hossain's Short Stories,” which was published in *The Daily Star*, Jarin Tasneem Shoilee, a postgraduate student in the English Department at Jahangirnagar University in Dhaka, Bangladesh, explained how prostitution and motherhood became unbearable for her protagonist Akali. After reviewing the literature, this paper will try to analyze the identity and status of prostitutes and their profession in select South Asian short stories. Aisha Haleem examined select short stories of Saadat Hasan Manto and Kamala Das in an article titled “Trauma in Prostitution: An Analysis of Select Short Stories of Saadat Hasan Manto and Kamala Surayya Das” published in *Creative Saplings*.

Krishan Chander (1914–1977), (at many places also spelled as Krishn Chander) was a prolific and celebrated Urdu writer, widely recognized for his evocative short stories, novels, and essays that vividly depicted the socio-political milieu of pre- and post-Independence India. Born in Poonch, a region of Jammu and Kashmir, his literary works are deeply rooted in the cultural and political complexities of the subcontinent, reflecting the struggles of ordinary people with an acute sense of empathy and realism. Chander’s writing style is known for its lyrical quality, profound humanism, and satirical undertones. He was a prominent figure in South Asian literature because his writings frequently addressed issues like poverty, class conflict, love, and the effects of

Partition. Some of his acclaimed works include “Shikast,” “Aik Gadhe Ki Sarguzasht” (translated as *The Adventures of a Donkey*), and “Do Furlong Lambi Sadak” (*The Two Furlong Long Road*), which highlight his versatility and unique narrative style. In addition to his literary pursuits, Chander was actively involved in social and political movements, and his ideologies resonated with the progressive writers' movement in India. His alignment with the ideals of socialism and human equality is often expressed in his stories, making him a key figure in progressive Urdu literature. Krishan Chander's contributions to Urdu literature remain significant for their timeless relevance and artistic brilliance. His works continue to inspire scholars, writers, and readers across linguistic and cultural boundaries, affirming his legacy as one of the stalwarts of 20th-century South Asian literature (Krishan Chander; “Krishan Chander: Profile and Biography | Rekhta”)

The current short story, “A Letter from a Prostitute” (*Ek Tawaif Ka Khat*), was published in a collection *Hum Wahshi Hain*. Professor of Linguistics at Jawahar Lal Nehru University, Ayesha Kidwai has translated the short story into English. The story talks about the horror and trauma of communal riots and how our hypocritical society does not care about the ostracised community, which once was the most aesthetically rich one. As most and almost every war and violence was led and operated by the men, so did the communal riots of partition. During that period, men took women as a tool for vengeance and used to slatter women of each other's communities to humiliate them, as it is known that society always has definitions and roles for every profession, community, and individual. So, during those days, men used to abduct women, and after raping them, they used to sell them in brothels, because brothels and people who worked were considered immoral and unethical. Novelists and scholars have portrayed these sorts of scenes in their works time and again, such as Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man*, in which the Aaya was abducted and sold in brothels. In Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar*, Puro was abducted by Rashid as a vengeance. Similarly, in this short story, Bela and Batool were abducted and sold on Faris Road. The letter starts by addressing Jinnah and Pundit Jawahar Lal Nehru. The unnamed prostitute described how Bela and Batool ended up in a brothel by iterating on the fact that the people on Faris Road and the areas attached to that area have always been looked down upon by the so-called respectable community of the society, so much so that before this letter, Nehru and Jinnah did not hear about the Faris Road and never walked on that street.

Bela, a twelve-year-old Hindu girl from Rawalpindi, was abducted by a Pathan, who came with a mod and brutally cut off her mother's breast and sold Bela into a brothel. On the other hand, an eleven-year-old Muslim girl Batool from Jalandhar, was abducted by a jat. She was the daughter of a Pathan from the little hamlet of Khem Karan. Batool's father had seven daughters; three were married and four were unmarried. Batool's father was a typical little farmer from Khem Karan, a poor but proud Pathan who had lived in Khem Karan for ages. Only three or four Pathans lived in the village of Jats. She also mentioned Bela's fascination and respect for Jinnah Sahab and how she bows down whenever she sees his photo. The abduction and brutality against each other as a community where women have to suffer without any involvement in the wars and riots was and is very questionable and still functional. Men of every community just wanted to humiliate each other through the destruction of female bodies, as Shauna Singh Baldwin's character Kusum during communal riots in *What the Body Remembers* was slaughtered and her pregnant body was cut down into six pieces; out of that, her unborn baby was forcefully removed. The brutality and the influence of that brutality could be seen in the vivid and bold description of the narrator and letter writer in this story when she narrates how Batool's sister was raped in front of their father's corpse and how Jats forcefully pissed into Batool's father's mouth: "First, the Jats gouged out his eyes. Then they pissed into his mouth. Then they slit him from the throat down and disemboweled him. Then they forced themselves on his married daughters and sowed their humiliation" (Chander).

Finally, she revealed her intention behind this open description of brutality, where she grabbed their attention towards the other and unspoken side of the riots, communal hatred, and phallocentric approach. She says that now she wants them to adopt these girls as she does not want them to end up in a brothel because they already grabbed a lot of attention of the clients who came there, but even after being in this profession, she does not want to take advantage of the innocence of these girls. "Panditji, what I want is that you make Batool your daughter. Jinnah Sahib, I wish for you to consider Bela your 'daughter of the auspicious stars'. Just for once, extricate them from the clutches of Farris Road; keep them in your homes" (Chander).

Saadat Hasan Manto (1912–1955) was a prolific and controversial Urdu short story writer, playwright, and essayist, renowned for his unflinching portrayal of human emotions and societal hypocrisies. Born on May 11, 1912, in Ludhiana, British India, Manto grew up in a conservative Kashmiri family. Despite initial academic struggles, he found his calling in literature, influenced

by French and Russian literary works, particularly the writings of Victor Hugo and Anton Chekhov. Manto began his literary career by translating notable works into Urdu, such as Victor Hugo's *The Last Day of a Condemned Man* and Oscar Wilde's plays. His first original short story, "Tamasha" (1934), set against the backdrop of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, marked the emergence of his signature realistic and provocative style (Saadat Hasan Manto; Saadat Hasan Manto: Profile and Biography | Rekhta).

"Siraj" narrates the experiences of women and girls who deliberately enter this profession for financial gain but struggle to cope with the realities of earning money through prostitution. Consequently, they seek alternative means of acquiring money without engaging in sexual acts, as Dhondo, a pimp in the narrative, informs Manto that Siraj remains a virgin. The story is in conversational form between the writer and the pimp. Manto not only presented the lives of prostitutes in brothels but also the shop owners and other surrounding brothels, as this story starts with the description of a pimp named Dhondo and his struggle to get a customer for a sex worker named Siraj. Dhondo, while talking to the writer, revealed how difficult it is for him to get a customer because whenever he does, she scares them away by fighting with them, though she always went with them consensually, when the moment came for sex, she fought with them, which always made Dhondo return their customer's money. He wanted to get rid of her, but he was unable to do so because he began to like her despite being told about her physical unattractiveness and her propensity for filth and dirt. Manto wants to know the truth, so he searches for Siraj and takes her to the restaurant where he smokes with her and gives her forty rupees. Though she did not fight with him as she does with other customers because Manto also did not approach her directly in that way, he was scared by Dhondo's reaction, which was as expected; Dhondo quarreled with him because Manto did not choose the channel way to get Siraj. After a few days, he found Dhondo in the same place and enquired about Siraj and got to know that she demanded to go to Lahore, and there she found the man whom she once eloped, and that man left her in isolation; that's why she ended up in prostitution. She slept with him, and Dhondo was happy that finally, he made some money out of her involvement in his profession with equal zeal, but little did he know that all she wanted was to take revenge on that man because after spending an erotic night with him, she left with Dhondo and came back to Mumbai and started a business again with more zeal and involvement. As usual, Manto was telling and depicting the lives of sex workers through their realistic side. He not only presented the harsh reality but the way Siraj mentally and physically

started her profession was something nobody even thought of. Everyone has their judgmental perspectives and analyses, but Manto undoubtedly excelled in depicting the surrealistic side of the margins.

Another story is from Bangladeshi writer, Selina Hossain's "Akali's Life at the Station." Renowned Bangladeshi novelist Selina Hossain was born on June 14, 1947, and is well-known for her writings, which include *Poka Makorer Ghor Boshoti* (1996) and *Hangor Nodi Grenade* (1976). Her achievements have earned her prominent national accolades, including the Bangla Academy Literary Award in 1980, the Ekushey Padak in 2009, and the Independence Day Award in 2018. Hossain's novels and short stories have reached international audiences through translations into multiple languages, including English, Russian, French, Japanese, Korean, Finnish, and Malay. Between 2014 and 2018, she served as the chairperson of the Bangladesh Shishu Academy. On February 3, 2022, the Awami League government appointed her as president of the Bangla Academy, a position she assumed on February 6 for a term of three years. However, following the formation of an interim government on August 8, 2024, Hossain resigned from this role on October 17, 2024. Selina Hossain, a renowned Bangladeshi fiction writer, has gained recognition both nationally and globally for her ability to portray stories grounded in reality. Her writings reflect her deep understanding of Bangladeshi feminism, offering authentic depictions of women's struggles with motherhood and sexuality throughout their lives. Drawing parallels to French feminist Hélène Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine*, or women's writing, Hossain's works delve into the intricacies of the feminine psyche. Many of her short stories critically explore themes of motherhood, shedding light on the complex experiences of women (Shoilee).

"Akali's Life at the Station" (Akalir Stationer Jiban) is a story about a minor girl who eloped from her stepmother's house and ended up being raped at Kamalapura railway station and was also given ten takas from a man as payment for the service. Though she did not understand that, soon she realized that she turned into a prostitute and took that money from the floor. She is now twenty-four years old a woman with a girl child named Putul, whom she conceived while working as a maid when she was fourteen to sixteen years old, the irony is that she did not want to kill that child and refused to listen to her aunt Nishi that she was raped because according to her, she was consciously enjoying the erotica with her master's only son in the kitchen for almost three months, though it was clear that he took advantage of her vulnerability and poverty the definition

of love and being loved for her was so confined and misleading that she refused the idea of being raped and physically violated by that boy, finally she was thrown out of the house with numerous curses and abuses that she was a whore, how can she think of a girl who can live in that bog house as a daughter-in-law. One day while playing, her daughter Putul died by coming under the railway tracks; "This is where her Putul had been crushed under the wheels of a train" (Hossain 20). After that heartbreaking incident, she started selling her body at the railway station as a full-time street sex worker. Now she knows how to prevent unwanted motherhood, and she always takes these measurements to avoid troubles. Now she does not feel hurt by any uncomfortable remarks and roams around freely with searching eyes and attractive appearance in search of customers. "Akali is an experienced woman now. She wears colorful saris... the torment in her soul grows and grows—till it seems to explode within her. Someone passing by her perhaps remarks caustically: The slut! She is not hurt by such remarks" (Hossain 20-21).

The last short story is Govinda Bahadur Malla 'Gothale's "What Are You Doing Shobha" (Ke Gareki Shobha) from Nepal. A notable figure in Nepali literature, Gothale, was a distinguished writer from Nepal, widely recognized for his acclaimed novel *Pallo Gharko Jhyal*. Honoured with the prestigious Jagadamba Shree Puraskar in 2055 B.S. (approximately 1999), he made significant contributions to Nepalese literature. His literary journey began with the poem "Mamata," first published in 1992 B.S. Gothale introduced a new perspective to storytelling in Nepal, incorporating a psychoanalytic exploration of his characters. His work firmly established him as a prominent voice in short story writing, leaving an enduring impact on Nepali literature. The story is about a sex worker named Shobha in the brothel of an owner named Dhanmaya. The story starts with Shobha looking out of the window, waiting for one of the sex workers in the brothel to come with the news of her mother's whereabouts, and continuously thinking about her old days at home before becoming a prostitute. She used to live a healthy and normal life at home in the security of her loved ones. Once she tried to meet her mother but could not confront her and saw her last time at the stairs of Pashupatinath mandir. Hasina, another prostitute, is continuously talking to her about her customers and telling her how she stole the watch of her customers, who think themselves smarter than her. Shobha was forcefully married to someone, and after that unhappy marriage, it ended in widowhood. She faced disgust so many times in her life as her father once said that he would celebrate the death of her daughter because she was a whore: "Do not utter that whore's name; if she died, I would celebrate" (Malla 37). Dhanmaya also stopped her by saying

that she would not be accepted by the family and society even at her mother's funeral. "Dhanmaya shouted to her again, "Listen to what I say. Don't go you will be insulted. They won't let you near" (Malla 43). Her elder brother took his eyes off when he saw his sister after she became a prostitute. Becoming a prostitute was not in her hands and not her or anyone's prior choice but respect is a basic need and right of every human being, especially when they are intentionally not promoting and causing any harm in the public domain against the law and rules. Prostitution is not legal in Nepal but there is a hill Dalit community, known as the Badi community, in which many women are forced to opt for prostitution as they are not allowed to live a life like Brahmins. So, through prostitution, they earn their livelihood. One of the Badi community prostitutes says, "For many years, I thought it was my fate to be a prostitute... Now I realize this system wasn't made by God. It was made by man" ("Badi people"). Gothale examines the mind of a widow who has become a prostitute. When first published, this story was innovative for the unusual depth of its psychological analysis and its frank depiction of the hypocrisy inherent in Nepali society's attitude to prostitution. Shobha is a high-caste woman who has fallen into prostitution after being shunned by her family for a marriage of which they disapproved, a marriage that brought her unhappiness and, eventually, widowhood. The story focuses on the mental conflict Shobha experiences when she learns that her mother is dying. A second innovative attempt is to flashback technique to inform the reader of the events in Shobha's life that had led to her fall from grace.

Thus, prostitution, as represented in the selected South Asian short stories, is a deep commentary on the interplay of gender, class, and structures of society that marginalize and stigmatize sex workers. The stories break down stereotypes as prostitutes are not just victims of their situations but people living with intricate socio-economic realities with much resilience and agency. Through an analysis of Krishan Chander's "A Letter From A Tawaif," Saadat Hasan Manto's "Siraj," Selina Hossain's "Akali's Life at the Station," and Gopal Bahadur Malla 'Gothale's "What Are You Doing Shobha?" this research paper highlights the shared cultural and historical contexts while recognizing the nuanced differences in their portrayal. Unfolding the transformation of one respected tradition of courtesan practice, such as the tawaif or devadasi cultures, into stigmatized professions based on societal change and colonial intervention, stories come to light, expose judgment and marginalization in deeper ways, but highlight all the contributions they made toward art, culture, and resistance movements. The juxtaposition of the views of diverse South Asian writers in this paper has demonstrated how literature works as a vital

tool in raising the voices of the oppressed and creating critical dialogue in discussing the inequalities of the phallogocentric society. The results underpin the necessity of the revision of prostitution as an occupation and call for more representative cultural and socio-political aspects of the institution. Ultimately, the study forms part of the ongoing conversations about removing social prejudices and ensuring dignity at the margins of society.

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