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The Science of Signs: An Analysis of Manto's Mastery of Semiotics

Abstract:

Saadat Hassan Manto is one of the most prominent voices from South-East Asia, who has achieved a legendary status due to his most eloquent and articulate representation of the angst, pain and violence of the Indo-Pak partition. The present research aims at exploring the use and functions of semiotic elements in the works of Saadat Hassan Manto. The sample used for this purpose has been selected from three short stories of Manto, namely *Black Salwar* and *A Lump of Cold Flesh* translated by Jai Ratan and Toba Tek Singh translated by Pritchett (n.d.). The theoretical framework used to analyze the text is by Saussure (1983). The research follows a qualitative mode of inquiry. The data has been analyzed thematically, within the fundamentals of the earlier mentioned theoretical framework. The findings of the study revealed that Manto made an extra-ordinary use of semiotics to portray the psychological condition of his characters.

Key Words:

Manto, Semiotics, Saussure, and Partition.

Introduction

The study of literature has come a long way in the last century as new ways of analyzing text have added to the beauty and meaning of different texts. Semiotics as a field of study gives meaning to the different facets of texts, such as the use of colors, signs and symbols. Saadat Hassan Manto one of the most acclaimed writers of the Indo-Pak subcontinent is known for his ability to portray the miseries and trials whether physical or psychological with utmost sincerity. Often criticized for his realism and his harsh depiction of man's lack of morality in challenging times, he has written tales that shock the reader and create a gut-wrenching reaction.

The works of Manto have never been analyzed from the perspective of semiotics, even though in his writings we see him use several locations, animals, colors and even sounds to give meanings to his text. Manto is often loved and in some cases hated for his ability to play with the psychology of his readers, but what is usually over-looked is his massive ability to use signs and symbols as tools to expose the most hidden aspects of human psychology, be it in his titles or his narrative technique both are filled with this phenomenon. This study aims to investigate Manto's stories for signs and symbols, and how they enhance the reaction he wants to get from the readers.

Theoretical Framework

Ferdinand de Saussure was a Swiss born linguist and semiotician. He laid a foundation for many noteworthy developments in both semiology and

linguistics in the twentieth century. He is generally considered as one of the founders of twentieth-century linguistics and one of two major founders along with semiology/semiotics. Saussure (1983) was focused on the functions and patterns of language on the whole. He asserted that the relationship between the signified and the signifier is extremely arbitrary and analysis based in nature and is therefore at the core of the main debate. His sign/referent and signified/ signifier scheme are the basic ideas of the field of semiotics. This adds a new way of looking at literature as it deals with the minutest of details given by writers a meaning and a significance which before this theory was missing.

Literature Review

Manto and Critics

According to Ricoeur Manto had a special gift, he calls it "retrospective intelligibility", (Bhalla, 1996) adds to this idea by saying that Manto does not highlight the grey or even the lighter sides of social-order he uses his ability to bring out the uglier aspects of it. Manto's stories are focused on the most fraudulent, creased, and crooked parts of humanity, he doesn't do it strike back or take revenge, neither is his intention focused on nurturing or defending it. He is just a man looking at his own society and culture, he fights for humanity present in each and every one of us, not to defend anyone. De (2013) is of the view that Manto, portrays the pain of the partition in his stories, presenting the shock which took away the capacity of just language to represent it, as all meaning was

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lost. The trauma was indescribable for the sufferers and in many cases even the aggressors. So a new definition rises for the word "victim", and the aggressor is in most cases also a victim of his circumstances and social pressures. (Ahiri.n.d) seems to be a fan of Manto's extreme love for humanity, he says that Manto depicts the secretive angst of men and women, be it in the sexual context or due to the taboos of social and religious nature. He was a crusader for the rights of women, he highlights things no other writer of his time deemed important says (Gat.2013).

Semiotics

Humans have been gifted with unimaginable powers and numerous abilities by the creator and one of the greatest gifts are their ability to communicate is one of them. We as humans can communicate thoughts and ideas through several means such as expressions, gestures and words. It can be said that human communications are complimented with senses, gestures and symbols or signs. Living beings especially humans have the inherent capacity of insight which makes them able to comprehend symbols and signs which makes them understand the difference between inorganic and organic objects; this very capacity can be called semiosis (Sebeok, 2001).

Several writers such as (Berger, 2010; Eco, 1979; Suhor, 1991) are of the view that the study of examination and analysis of signs is basically called semiotics. Saussure (1983) says that the role of signs and symbols in our socio-cultural paradigm is actually what semiotics is, it examines and evaluates the role of signs and their nature and the nature of their performance and the purpose they serve in the communication paradigm. Eco (1979) is of the view that semiotics stands for elements that signify concepts that are not really easy to decipher, within the regular means of communication, which are symbolically portrayed through signs. In semiotics factors such as objects, sounds, colors, images and gestures. According to Culler (1989), everything in this universe is a sign.

The sign can be identified as an essential element of semiotics which represents something other than itself conceptually; whereas technical sign can be a drawn figure, written or spoken word. It can also be referred to like any particular cultural idea of any material thing. Sign constitutes the components of the signifier (object-word) and signified as the culturally constructed sense of that word or object (Berger, 2010). Sebeok (2001) has strengthened this very belief by saying that signs are a material figure which may be either imagined or made and symbioses refer to happenings or emotions. He further asserts that signs have a very important role in the lives of human beings as they facilitate the communication process and make it easier. Caivano (1998) focuses more on the characteristics and concepts of signs, he asserts that signs can be a great substitute for communicating the concept of anything, except for the basic things that it signifies.

Semiotics in Literature

Semiotics has a wonderful connection with literature as it talks about and adds meaning to literature which was hitherto unseen, when meaning is assigned to the most random ideas given by the writer, the text starts to take a new shape altogether. Piaget in 1970, measured the representation of jewelry, and the role it played in the Victorian literary discourse. He focused on the works of Thackeray, Eliot, Collins and Ruskin. This specific research was focused on the semiotic analysis of jewelry and gems and what they stand to represent semiotically, what images and meaning do they portray, in the narrative of the Victorian novel. The research beautifully explains the semiotic significance of gems and jewelry, each of the writers has portrayed and extracted different meanings from different gems, the meaning in semiotics is extracted through a cultural context.

Research Methodology

This study makes use of the qualitative mode of inquiry, as the data has been analyzed in a textual and thematic way. The research deals with the analysis within the fundamentals outline drawn by the theoretical framework of Saussure (1983). The sample selected for the analysis is chosen through purposeful sampling, as the stories selected are considered to be the most critically acclaimed short stories by Manto and have received the most stars by google book ratings.

The Rationale for Neutrality of Translations

Special effort has been made by the researcher to ensure the validity and neutrality of the translation chosen for the analysis. Two translations from two different continents have been chosen to make the findings authentic and unbiased.

Analysis

The selected three short stories are analyzed in order to answer the research questions.

A lump of Cold Flesh

The following quotes are taken from the short story "A lump of cold fish" for the analysis: "I...I've murdered six people with the same kirpan!"

"Kulwant, my love, I can't tell you how beautiful she was. I would have killed her too. But I said, No, Ishar Sian, you have fun with Kulwant almost every night. Better taste this fruit also." (p. 88).

This story talks about a man who finds a powerless and helpless woman. Who is in position to even scream let aside fight for her life. Ishar Singh a man who is known for his masculinity and strength and considers himself quite a stud as women flock around him due to his strong and athletic body and consider him an epitome of masculinity. This powerful and narcissist man when he found himself in a position of power in front of a helpless woman, decides not to kill her, not until he had some fun by raping and molesting her. These lines are brilliantly written as we see such pride and smugness in the speech of Ishar Singh saying that he had thought about killing the woman but that, of course, would be less fun. Where is the fun in just killing a woman, he without any regret or remorse tells his girlfriend that he wanted to have fun with her. Here Manto talks about the ability of power to leave a man inhumane. Power has the ability to bring out the best and the worst in us, and here Manto tells us the tale of a man who symbolizes evil in the first part of the story and in the second part of the story becomes a victim of his own cruelty. Manto subtly highlights the idea of karma, what goes around comes around.

Without uttering a word, Ishar Singh stood there with a hang-dog look. It appeared as if his firmly tied turbans were loosely uncoiling...wrestler running the full gamut of his strategy in the wrestling arena but to no avail (p. 85).

Here we see that Ishar Singh who in a fit of hatred and anger had tried to rape a woman, and in his anger and frustration and in a position of extreme power had overcome a struggling and scared woman, he had achieved a godlike position in front of her but it turned out that the woman had died, and he had been showing his power and might by molesting a dead body. The uncoiling of his turban, a symbol of a man's honor and pride, was no more on his head and he stood there still and stripped of all his masculinity over a piece of meat, a cold piece of meat. This man when he tried to have an intimate moment with Kulwant Kaur one of his favorite women was incapable of performing the one thing which boosted his male ego, no matter how hard he tried he could not perform sexually. He tried and tried but could not get back to his old self, he had lost his masculinity. Manto here in a very subtle and yet strong way talks about the idea of psychological trauma, after realizing that he had committed a sin not just against one religion or just one woman, he had committed a crime against humanity. The burden of his crime is too heavy for him to carry, too heavy for his soul and the punishment he has to suffer is going to be at the cost of his manhood.

"Don't call her names," he said. (p. 87).

These lines are an amazing amalgamation of so many psychological aspects, here we see that Ishar Singh who had been suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, both mentally and physically, as he could not perform sexually after his ordeal with the dead body of the girl, he had a self-image of masculinity and had failed in that regard lately so Kulwant Kaur, stats thinking that he is having an affair with some other woman, and starts calling her names, and then Isharsingh asks her not to curse her. Here we see that even in a condition of extreme humiliation Isharsingh feels less like a man maybe but more like a human being. Manto here indicates that gender roles defining us in so many ways often requires us to perform in accordance with the socially acceptable and encouraged manner, and very often these roles take away a part of our humanity as we are most focused on being a man or a woman rather than a human. IsharSingh's sympathetic for the dead woman is a confession of how when she was alone she was just a piece of flesh which was to be toyed with, but after her death, she has gained her status as a human being again, not just a woman or a Muslim. Manto here refers to the psychological aspects of guilt and empathy.

Toba Tek Singh

The following quotes are taken from the short story "Toba Tek Singh" for the analysis:

There was one Sikh who had been in the insane asylum for fifteen years...Although indeed, he sometimes leaned against a wall (p. 3).

Toba Tek Singh is by far one of the most critically acclaimed stories of Manto, in this story, Manto's craft is at its absolute best. From the choice of settings for the story which is a pre-partition mental asylum, to the most amazing characterization, where every character is representing an amazing semiotic message. The above-mentioned lines are the introductory lines of the protagonist Bishan Singh, a man who has forgotten about almost everything but only remembers his hometown Toba Tek Singh. The amazing significance of the seemingly uncomprehending able gibberish if broken-down is a way of Manto to signify so many things. Upar refers to "above" which signifies the absolute oblivion of the power structures towards the helpless and in this case the literally forgotten, the crazy and the mad. "be dhyana" refers to the concept of "be-dhyan" which in Urdu means someone who doesn't pay attention, again this might even be Manto's way of highlighting the fate of the oppressed as being written by God in a very careless way. The other words "mung di daal" and "lantern", might be Manto's way of pointing out how limited the survival needs of the poor are, they don't care about the idealistic ambitions of the rich and powerful, like liberty, freedom and luxury. For them, the mere

struggle to get by with enough to make it through the day is ambition enough. Further, we see that Bishan Singh's insomnia has been highlighted and his inability to even sit down accepts against a wall. The wall symbolizes the power structure which ends up destroying the only certainty in his life which was his home and his routine, and in the end, he ended up dying banging his against this very wall of power. So we see how Manto's articulation of so many symbols and signs is articulated in such few words.

His name was Bishan Singh, but everyone called him "Toba Tek Singh." He had absolutely no idea what day it was, what month it was, or how many years had passed. But every month when his near and dear ones came to visit him, then he himself used to be aware of it. Thus he used to tell the custodian that his visitors were coming (p. 1).

Here again, we see Manto at his absolute best when comes to his art as a semiotician, in these lines, Manto talks about a man who has forgotten all other aspects of his identity, he doesn't remember being a father, or a farmer, or a brother or even a son. All he remembers is that he is from Toba Tek Singh, so much enrooted is his motherland in him that is known only by the name Toba Tek Singh, this shows the kind of attachment he has to his motherland, his attachment to a specific space. Manto further elaborates on his character's psychological condition by saying that he has no idea of time, the idea if time seems to have lost all meaning and significance for him, accept the day when his family came to see him. Here Manto seems to be saying that he would be having visitors today. In these lines, Manto seems to be highlighting that even when a human loses his mind he still feels the psychological need to be cared for and loved. The family that sent him to a mental asylum still is his family and seeing them even if it is once a month makes him feel loved and wanted. The endless boundaries of the human mind may forget certain things but the feeling of love and care are the psychological needs of even the insane.

In the insane asylum, there was also a lunatic who called himself God. When one day Bisham Singh asked him whether Toba Tek Singh was in Pakistan or Hindustan, he burst out laughing, as was his habit, and said, "It's neither in Pakistan nor in Hindustan - because we haven't given the order yet (p. 3).

Again in these lines, we see how Manto uses his brilliant pen to highlight the absurdity of the situation, the patients at the mental asylum are going through and how in there extremely frail state of mind they have been trying to make sense of who these people are, those who are playing with their lives. Manto's use of the analogy of the word "god", is a reference to the sense of superiority that the powerful have over the lives of the underprivileged who need to adhere to the decisions made for them by the powerful. Manto uses humor as a satirical and symbolic whip to slash the power structures. Also here Manto seems to be questioning whether God almighty had ordained these orders or whether men playing god had made a decision which was to uproot the millions of innocent humans who became the victims of the violence which followed this ill-thought-out plan.

In the pre-dawn peace and quiet, from Bishan Singh's throat there came a shriek that pierced the sky... From here and there a number of officers came running, and they saw that the man who for fifteen years, day and night, had constantly stayed on his feet, lay prostrate. There, behind barbed wire... piece of ground that had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh. (p. 1).

These last lines from the story are probably the most significant when it comes to semiotics as here Manto tells us that the man who in spite of suffering the most difficult and challenging conditions a man could go through such as losing his identity and his family, but nothing could bring him down, nothing could make him surrender, had now died and that too in no man's land. The barbed wire on both sides signifies the homelessness and the rootlessness of many like Bishan Singh. Manto's ability to narrate this story by saying that the piece of land where he died belonged to no one. And also the rising of the sun says so much, the dawn of freedom for many had become an unending night for the people who had lived in the land for centuries and yet by one stroke of the pen, someone somewhere had written dislocation for millions.

Black Salwar

The following quotes are taken from the short story "Black Salwar" for the analysis:

"Then she noticed the laundry shop signboard right under her flat 'Dirty clothes are washed here', the signboard read. And she knew she had reached her flat." (p. 13).

In this story, we see how Manto narrates the story of a woman who is a prostitute and she lives in a very miserable neighborhood, just under her flat is a laundry. Manto's semiotic mastery is visible in these lines as we see that the life of a woman who's only utility is that of enduring and cleaning the filth of the society. Her whole being works as a laundry where the filth of the society is sent to, in order for her to make it tolerable and reusable. Manto in these lines points out the significance of such women who are not treated with any respect by the society and yet they provide a service which if closely examined saves other women from becoming victims to the carnal desires of reckless and criminal men. Manto also has a sympathetic tone and almost makes the reader connect to the pain of the woman, who knows her position in the society and surrenders to her plight as she sees no one who can rescue her from her pathetic and pitiable life. The use of words such as "dirty clothes" and "reached her flat" are an amazing way to highlight and link the story to the condition of a human being, the symbolic significance is what gives these lines meaning.

She would stand there for hours, leaning against the railing and idly watching the railway engine shunting in the railway yard in front. A good shed was at the other end of the road... Sultana's eyes went to her hands-on which blue veins stood out like those

iron rails. In this big yard engines and carriages kept shunting day and night, the clanking and rattling of engines rending the air (p. 14).

In these lines again Manto relates a railway junkyard to the condition of the prostitute. This woman lives in two cities and in both cities, she lives in the same kind of locality. The junkyard symbolizes the idea of a life gone to waste, a being completely overshadowed by the heavy and loaded packages which make it a load too heavy for a person to carry. It refers to the emptiness filled with junk just to avoid the hollowness of the being. The packages signify the burden of religious and social taboos that this woman has to carry the day in and day out. The symbolic relation constructed by Manto in the association of the rails to that of Sultana's eyes and the veins in them is such a beautiful comparison. This symbolizes the endless pursuit of dreams that these eyes weave, and the endless rails being compared to veins is such a refreshing comparison to a human being without a destination and being seen as nothing else but a commodity. The representation of commodification of a female body and the impact it has on the person and her psychology is beautifully presented in these lines.

Sometimes a detached bogey, getting an initial push from the engine, kept running on the track under its own momentum. Sultana would feel that an invisible hand had also given a push ... when the momentum would spend itself and she would come to a dead stop at some unknown spot where there would be no one to take care of her (p. 15).

These lines again have a lot of symbolic significance as we see that Manto here compares the life of Sultana the prostitute as a detached bogey, one that has been uprooted and sent swirling aimlessly in an infinite space of shame and dishonor. Sultana's beautiful complaint to God is mesmerizing, as in a moment of introspection she sees her life as a body being governed solely by the forces of physics as if there was no one who could just stop this motion which had left her nauseated by her endless movement. The invisible cabin man who was responsible for her life's motion had abandoned her and had left her stranded in an unknown, alien place and had withdrawn all the brakes which could have aided her recovery. Sultana sees no hope for the future either, she seems to be void of all graces, as she believes that the only day she will recover and halt will be in the lap of death, and that too will be a solitary and painful affair. Manto in these lines shows the solitude and hopelessness of a person who is crushed by fate and society and so suffers at several psychological levels and Manto represents it wonderfully through the use of semiotics.

At Ambala, too, her house was quite close to the railway station but there she had not seen things in such a somber light. Sometimes she deluded herself with the thought that the network of railway lines before her was not yard but a red-light district and the big dark engines were the grunting and farting fat, dark Seths who sometimes visited her at Ambala (p. 15).

The condition of sultana has been again beautifully narrated by Manto, here we see how through the use of geography he makes it clear that she moved from one place to the other, and she realizes that even when she lived in another city her condition was the same. Here a comparison is made between a red light area and a railway yard, which is so symbolic in nature as she sees just more than just iron railroads and the bogeys have been compared to men, who come to the red light areas, these men come to these women and crush them and shatter not just their bodies but their souls. The use of the physical references to these men suggests that sultana has a very hard time getting intimate with these ill-mannered and uncivilized almost ugly men. But like a railroad, she has to endure whatever is thrown at her. So here again we see Manto highlighting the psychological helplessness of sultana and the self-pity she feels when her survival depends on selling her body, piece by piece.

"Sultana smiled back at him and then her gaze traveled to an engine which had appeared in the yard. She felt as if the engine was also dressed in black. In order to erase the silly thought from her mind, she looked down at the lane" (p. 16).

In these lines again Manto makes use of the semiotics of color to create a psychological connection between a railway bogey, a human being and the color black. This woman at this moment realizes that the man who claims to love and respect her is actually using women like her to gain sexual favors. She at that moment realizes that her worst fear of having an aimless and goalless life like a bogey, is actually how Shanker sees her, she trusted this man and he bought her what she wanted, giving her a false sense of security and love. But the truth when it becomes evident ensures her that her worst fears regarding her life are actually true. At that moment she sees the darkness in her life and sees the bogey which is her shadowed image as being wrapped up in darkness and surrounded by a suffocating gloominess and betrayal.

"Yes, they call me Sultana".

"Shanker got up and started laughing. " My name is Shanker," he said." Some names really sound odd. Come, let's go in." (p. 22).

This again is a line so full of meanings semiotically, this part of the story highlights many ideas just by the use of names. Sultana is a prostitute and ironically the name means a queen, it's almost funny how Manto has shown the helplessness of a woman who lets a man be with her, just so she can feel accepted and wanted, whereas queens have a position of authority and power, but sultana seems to be a psychologically dependent and deprived human being. On the other hand, Shanker being the name of one of the mightiest gods of Hinduism is a man who seems to be seeking happiness through these women. He doesn't want to pay them and so tries to please them by fooling them romantically and cheats them. The meaning of Shanker refers to the giver of happiness.

His satirical remark on names sounding odd is actually a confession that Shankar makes, identifying the irony of the situation, his manipulative behavior towards these women, just to gain happiness is the exact opposite of what he suggests.

Conclusion and Findings

The findings in this research suggest that Manto uses semiotics as irony, satire, sarcasm humor and most importantly as a tool to highlight the otherwise mundane elements of life. He uses it to attract and entice the reader and a very good example of that is his titles such as seen above and many more, such as the dog of titwal, black marginalia, and empty bottles and boxes, all these deal with human psychology and most of the time he uses semiotics to relate these human psychological conditions to characters and situations. Manto uses semiotics of color, environment, language, and even sounds to highlight the psychological condition of his characters. Manto highlights many factors such as identity crisis, low self-esteem, superiority and inferiority complexes, and post-traumatic stress disorder and many more mysteries of the human psychology which were not even recognized by the psychological community at the time when he was writing about them and that too in a manner where they could not just be represented through words, he used amazing imagery, extraordinarily strong language and most importantly the capacity of understanding our own psychology to empathize with these characters in his stories who are as weak and fragile psychologically as any of us can be. Manto's articulate use of semiotics adds enormously to the experience of his reader as everything in the story becomes relevant and adds to the realistic imagery which is either severely criticized or is considered Manto's forte.

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