

The Ob-Scene Love of Manto

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In the story “Smell”, for which he went to trial for obscenity, S.H. Manto delves into “the circumstances of [desire of] particular men and women.”¹ Let us start from the end: “In one last attempt, Randheer ran his hand over the girl’s milky-white body but felt no tremor. His new bride, the daughter of a distinguished magistrate, with a bachelor’s degree, the heart-throb of countless boys at her college, failed to rouse her husband’s passion.”² For his arousal was occupied elsewhere. At the start, Randheer laments the absence of Christian prostitutes who decided to join the civil war and interrogates his special attraction for them. Although they flaunted their “seductive assets”, “spoke abashedly” and “swayed their legs”, couldn’t any woman boast of these qualities?

A Freudian response would speak of a restriction being placed on object choice³ - Randheer’s Hindu wife, who recalls the incestuous forbidden figure, evokes no desire. However, the sensual current flows towards a Christian prostitute who can be easily debased. But Manto’s interrogation does not stop at debasement in the sphere of love.

To re-establish his virility, Randheer calls upon a *ghatan*⁴, a poor dirty creature, trembling in the rain. This encounter becomes an appointment with his object *a*. “She was something else altogether. So unbelievably different! A strange smell wafting from her body flooded his senses all night— a smell at once pleasant and nauseating [...] without it creeping into every crevice of his mind [...] would he have felt as close to this *ghatan* as he did now? Absolutely not!”⁵

In seminar 16, Lacan coins the term “l’en-forme *du A*” for the topological form of the Other [A] as the locus of inscription. It refers to the Other as the body “hollowed out” by the little *a* that makes a hole in it. Thus, the first alterity of the signifier from itself which is designated as Other [A] “cannot express the subject except in the form of what we have learned in psychoanalytic practice to discern on the basis of a specific strangeness [*étrangeté*”],⁶ i.e. the strangeness of the object *a* which is essential to the subject.

For a speaking subject, “a trace no longer has any other prop other than *enforme* of A.”⁷ While an animal is recognisable by the trace of its smell or its footprint, a speaking-being can efface his traces and furthermore replace them with his signature, thereby making them his own. Lacan outlines four ways of effacement - four forms of object *a* - gaze, voice, oral and anal.⁸

The smell that elevates Randheer to an ecstatic state and turns into an obstacle in relation to his model wife, can be read as a signature of the object *a* in all its strangeness, as something “very conspicuous and yet completely unfathomable” for the subject. “Amazingly, though Randheer detested the odour of perspiration [...] he found himself madly kissing the *ghatan*’s hairy armpits [...] and feeling no revulsion; instead he found it strangely pleasurable.” The trace of the waste object has been effaced and replaced by the signature of smell, “a smell at once pleasant and nauseating”, distinctly defining

¹ Manto, S.H., *Short Story Writers and Matters of Sex*, published in “My Name is Radha, The Essential Manto”, trans. Muhammad Umar Memon, Penguin Books, India, 2015, p. 551.

² Manto, S.H., “Smell” [Boo] “My Name is Radha, The Essential Manto”, p. 394.

³ Freud, S., “On the Universal Tendency of Debasement in the Sphere of Love” (1912), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume X*, London: Hogarth Press, 1959, p. 182-183.

⁴ A woman from the hills.

⁵ S.H. Manto, Smell [Boo], *op. cit.*, p. 391.

⁶ Lacan, Jacques., *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVI, From an Other to the other*, ed. J. -A. Miller, trans. B. Fink, Cambridge UK: Polity, 2024, p. 270.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 271.

⁸ *Ibid.* pp., 270-271.

the subject's relationship to the object. Manto's writing is ob-scene for it unveils the dynamics of sexuality, doing away with the curtain of love.