

## Saadat Hasan Manto's "Kali Shalwar" and "Hatak": A Reading in the Light of Slavoj Žižek's Theory of Ideology

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This paper examines the implicit functioning of ideology in Saadat Hasan Manto's two short stories, namely, "Kali Shalwar" ("Black Shalwar") and "Hatak" ("Insult"). It employs the idea of ideology as elaborated by Slavoj Žižek and proceeds to undertake a comprehensive and critical analysis of these stories. The paper critically examines the two stories examining how these fictional narratives highlight the role played by ideology in the lives of female sex workers. After giving a brief overview of Slavoj Žižek's theory of ideology, the paper attempts a critical appraisal of ideology as it has been portrayed in the two texts.

Slavoj Žižek establishes a new way to read the traditional conception of ideology as 'false consciousness' of reality. According to Žižek, the most basic definition of ideology is provided by Karl Marx- "they do not know it, but they are doing it", in other words, people's ignorance about their subjection to ideology (Žižek 24). With this model of ideology, the process of ideological critique is fairly straightforward. All that is required is to lead the naive ideological consciousness to a point at which it can recognize that its understanding of reality is distorted. As soon as ideology is recognized as ideology, that is, as a distorted version of the truth, it disappears. However, Žižek points out that this is not the case today. Subjects already know that they are receiving a distorted version of reality, yet they go on with it. Žižek, following the German theorist Peter Sloterdijk, calls such subjects "cynical subjects". The cynical subject already accepts that it is being misled by a flawed and distorted version of reality but still it does not dispense with that skewed vision. Instead of Marx's formula of ideology, the formula proposed by Sloterdijk is- "they know very well what they are doing, but still they are doing it" (Žižek 25). Žižek argues that ideological illusion lies not in the "knowing" but in the "doing".

In his famous essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an Investigation", Louis Althusser divides the apparatuses of domination in a class society into two categories – the Repressive State Apparatus and the Ideological State Apparatus. While the former works through repression or

coercion, the latter functions through ideology. The Repressive State Apparatus consists of the government, the courts, the army, the police, and the prison, and so on, whereas, the Ideological State Apparatuses are the religious ISA, the educational ISA, the family ISA, the legal ISA, the political ISA, the communication ISA, and the cultural ISA, and so on. According to Althusser, “ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects” (173). For Žižek, Althusser fails to explain the link between Ideological State Apparatuses and ideological interpellation: how does the Ideological State Apparatus internalize itself; how does an Ideological State Apparatus create belief in an ideology. According to Žižek, the external machine of State Apparatuses exercises its force only in so far as it is experienced in the unconscious of the subject, as a traumatic senseless injunction. For Althusser, the Symbolic machine of ideology is “internalized” into the ideological experience of Meaning and Truth through the process of ideological interpellation. But for Žižek, this internalization never fully succeeds, there is always a residue, a stain of traumatic irrationality and senseless sticking to it, which “far from hindering the full submission of the subject to the ideological command is, is the very condition of it” (43).

Žižek mentions that the subject identifies with some signifying feature in the big Other, in the Symbolic order. This feature assumes concrete, recognizable shape in a name or in a mandate that the subject takes upon himself or that is bestowed on him. This symbolic identification is to be distinguished from imaginary identification. The Lacanian theory of the mirror stage states that the subject must identify with the imaginary other to achieve self-identity, he must alienate himself – put his identity outside himself into the image of his double. Žižek states that the ‘effect of retroversion’ or the transference illusion is based primarily upon this imaginary level – it is supported by the illusion of the self as the autonomous agent which is present from the beginning as the origin of its acts. This imaginary experience is for the subject the way to misrecognize his radical dependence on the big Other.

According to Žižek, the relation between imaginary identification and symbolic identification is that between ‘constituted’ and ‘constitutive’ identification. Imaginary identification is identification with the image in which we appear likeable to ourselves, with the image representing ‘what we would like to be’, whereas, symbolic identification is identification with the very place *from where* we are being observed, *from where* we look at ourselves so that we appear likeable to ourselves. Žižek asserts that imaginary identification is

always identification on behalf of a certain gaze in the other. The subject is enacting the role in order to offer herself to the Other as the object of its desire, and she identifies symbolically with the *gaze* of the other. The imaginary identification is always subordinated to the symbolic identification (the point from which we are observed) which dominates and determines the image, the imaginary form in which we appear likeable to ourselves. Žižek points out that this interplay of imaginary and symbolic identification under the domination of symbolic identification constitutes the mechanism by means of which the subject is integrated into a social and ideological function – the way he/she assumes certain ‘mandates’ (116-123). Žižek writes:

The subject is always fastened, pinned to a signifier which represents him for the other, and through this pinning he is loaded with a symbolic mandate, he is given a place in the intersubjective network of symbolic relations. The point is that this mandate is ultimately always arbitrary: since its nature is performative; it cannot be accounted for by reference to the ‘real’ properties and capacities of the subject. So, loaded with this mandate, the subject is automatically confronted with a certain ‘*Che vuoi?*’, with a question of the Other. (125-26)

The Other addresses the subject as if the subject possesses the answer to the question of why he has this mandate, but the question is, of course, unanswerable. The subject does not know why he is occupying this place in the symbolic network. His own answer to this ‘*Che vuoi?*’ of the Other can only be the hysterical question “Why am I what you [the big Other] are saying that I am?” (Žižek 126).

Žižek argues that the hysterical question is an articulation of the incapacity of the subject to fulfill the symbolic identification, to assume fully and without restraint the symbolic mandate. It is, in other words, the effect and testimony of a failed interpellation. The answer to this ‘*Che vuoi?*’ appears as fantasy. Žižek elaborates:

[F]antasy functions as a construction, as an imaginary scenario filling out the void, the opening of the *desire of the Other*: by giving us a definite answer to the question ‘What does the Other want?’, it enables us to evade the unbearable deadlock in which the Other wants something from us, but we are at the same time incapable of translating this desire of the Other into a positive interpellation, into a mandate with which to identify. (Žižek 128)

Žižek states that fantasy appears as an answer to ‘*Che vuoi?*’, to the

unbearable enigma of the desire of the Other, of the lack in the Other but, at the same time, fantasy provides the co-ordinates of our desire. It constructs the frame enabling us to desire something. Žižek argues that we learn how to desire through fantasy. In the fantasy-scene the desire is not fulfilled or satisfied, but constituted, that is, it is given its objects. The desire structured through fantasy is a defence against the desire of the Other (*'Che vuoi?'*). It is through the mechanism of fantasy that an empirical, positively given object becomes an object of desire- it begins to contain some unknown quality, something which is 'in it more than it', and makes it worthy of our desire. It is noticeable that any given object cannot take its place in the fantasy-frame. Žižek writes that "some objects (those which are too close to the traumatic Thing) are definitely excluded from it; if, by any chance, they intrude into the fantasy-space, the effect is extremely disturbing and disgusting- the fantasy loses its fascinating power and changes into a nauseating object (134).

Žižek states that the theory of ideology descending from the Althusserian theory of interpellation limits itself to grasping the efficiency of an ideology exclusively through the mechanisms of imaginary and symbolic identification. It overlooks the dimension "beyond interpellation", the leftover which opens the space for desire and makes the Other (the symbolic order) inconsistent. For Žižek, all we have to do is experience how there is nothing 'behind' fantasy and how fantasy masks precisely this 'nothing' (138-41). Žižek remarks that every process of identification that confers on the subject a fixed socio-symbolic identity is ultimately doomed to fail. The function of ideological fantasy is to mask this inconsistency and thus to compensate us for the failed identification. In other words, "fantasy is a means for an ideology to take its own failure into account in advance" (Žižek 142). Thus, Žižek supplements the basic procedure of the 'criticism of ideology' with another formula: to detect, in a given ideological edifice, the element which represents within it its own impossibility.

### **“Kali Shalwar” (Black Shalwar)**

Manto's well-known story "Kali Shalwar" ("Black Shalwar") first appeared in the collection titled *Dhuan (The Smoke)* in 1942. The story grapples with certain social, psychological and religious issues centered on the life of Sultana, a sex worker who has moved from Ambala Cantonment to New Delhi on the insistence of her partner Khuda Baksh. She earned well in Ambala where the British soldiers were her regular customers but she faces great hardship in Delhi. As the story opens, Sultana is bored and depressed after

three months of practically having no business in Delhi. There arrives a moment of crisis in her life when her poverty begins to tell upon her religious beliefs and practices. The month of *Muharram* is approaching and Sultana needs black clothes for the occasion. She arranges a black *kameez* and a black *dupatta* but does not have a black *shalwar*. She requests Shankar, a man who gets her services free of cost, to get her a black *shalwar*. He takes her silver earrings and brings a black *shalwar* for her in return. He has exchanged her earrings for this *shalwar* with Mukhtar, another sex worker who lives and works in the same building. He acts as a middle man who takes advantage of both the women and gets free sexual favours from them. On the day of *Muharram*, Mukhtar, wearing Sultana's earrings, visits Sultana's place. She sees Sultana wearing her (Mukhtar's) black *shalwar*. However both women are reluctant to acknowledge the truth and they pretend as if they are ignorant of the transaction and their consequent exploitation by Shankar. At the end of the story, Sultana is well aware of her exploitation but she acts as if she is ignorant of the situation. In a way, by remaining silent, she colludes with her exploiter in the act of exploitation.

The story "Kali Shalwar" ("Black Shalwar") presents the Žižekian cynical subject in the form of Sultana. Throughout the story, Sultana equates herself with objects. This amply shows that she is very well aware of her commodified-status in the society. It can be said that she does not misrecognize her social reality but at the same time, it cannot be denied that she overlooks the ideological illusion structuring this reality. At the end of the story, Sultana knows that Shankar has exchanged her silver earrings for Mukhtar's black *shalwar* but she does not confront the reality. She is reluctant to acknowledge the truth of her situation and pretends as if she is ignorant of the transaction and her consequent exploitation at the hands of the middleman Shankar. The reason behind her connivance with her exploiter can be located in, what Žižek calls, the ideological (unconscious) fantasy structuring her social reality. Sultana, though aware of her status of a commodity in the flesh market, keeps a cynical distance from this reality. This cynical distance blinds her to the structuring power of fantasy; even if she keeps an ironical distance from her status, in her social activity she still adheres to that status.

Sultana's predicament can be understood clearly by looking at the relationship between her imaginary and symbolic identification. In her imaginary identification, she imitates or identifies with an image of 'female sex worker', a commodity, an object. Žižek argues that imaginary identification is always done

on behalf of a certain gaze in the Other. The question here is for whom is Sultana enacting this role of a female sex worker? Which gaze is considered when she identifies herself with this image? This gap between the way she sees herself and the point from which she is being observed is crucial for grasping the structuring power of ideological fantasy. Sultana is presenting herself as a female sex worker to offer herself to the Other as the object of its desire. Behind this 'feminine' imaginary figure, we can discover the patriarchal identification; Sultana is enacting fragile femininity but on the symbolic level, she is in fact identifying with the paternal gaze, to which she wants to appear likeable.

It is noticeable that Sultana compares herself, time and again, with objects. The often repeated image is that of the railway tracks, trains, bogies and engines. She compares herself to shunted carriage left to run on its own along a track. The most telling image is that of the engines as *seths* (her male customers); these *seth*-like fat engines shunt Sultana-like bogies hither and thither. The description of the engines appears repeatedly in the text:

Sometimes a thought came to her mind that the network of railway tracks that lay in front of her, the steam and smoke rising here and there, was a huge brothel. There were a lot of bogies being shunted hither and thither by a few fat engines. Sometimes Sultana felt that these engines were the *Seths* who used to visit her in Ambala from time to time. And sometimes when she saw a solitary engine passing slowly by a row of carriages, she felt as if a man was looking at the balconies while passing through a brothel<sup>1</sup>. (156-57)

The question, however, is how she must look at herself so that she appears as a carriage shunted by others. The answer, of course, is the gaze of the *seths* or the so-called 'respectable' society – only the patriarchal society can treat her as if she is an object, a commodity to be circulated in the market. Sultana's imaginary identification is subordinated to her symbolic identification. As Žižek points out in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, it is always the symbolic identification which dominates and determines the image or the imaginary form in which we appear likeable to ourselves (120). This interplay of imaginary and symbolic identification under the domination of symbolic identification constitutes the mechanism by means of which Sultana is integrated into the social and ideological function, the way she assumes her symbolic mandates.

Žižek mentions in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* that the movement

between symbolic and imaginary identification never comes out without a certain leftover. The subject is bestowed with a symbolic mandate and thus, is given a place in the intersubjective network of symbolic relations. But this mandate is ultimately always arbitrary because it cannot be accounted for by reference to the real properties and capacities of the subject. So the subject is automatically confronted with a certain ‘*Che vuoi?*’, the question: Why am I what the big Other is saying that I am? This question is an articulation of the incapacity of the subject to fulfill the symbolic identification, to assume fully and without restraint the symbolic mandate. It is the effect and testimony of a failed interpellation. In the story “Black Shalwar”, one does not come across any such instance that hints at the failure of interpellation. The story amply shows that Sultana has fully assumed her symbolic mandate, the status of a female sex worker, the role of a commodity to be circulated in the flesh market. The story ends precisely at the point where the reality of her exploitation stares at her in the face but she acts as if she is ignorant of this reality. This act that continues in spite of the knowledge of its falsity constitutes the ideological illusion.

### “Hatak” (Insult)

Manto’s another story titled “Hatak” (“Insult”) brings into focus the failure of interpellation. The story articulates the incapacity of the subject to fulfill the symbolic mandate. The protagonist of the story, another female sex worker named Sugandhi, cannot assume fully the symbolic mandate given by the big Other, that is, the Symbolic network. The story “Hattak” appeared in a collection of short stories entitled *Manto ke Afsane* in 1940. It was later adapted as a radio play by Manto, when he was working with All India Radio, Delhi in 1940-42. The story deals with the life of a female sex worker named Sugandhi. It focuses on one incident that illuminates Sugandhi’s entire life. Manto, no doubt, captures mute acceptance of a victim’s status by Sugandhi in the beginning of the text. But the story does not depict her as a meek and hunted victim throughout, she shows the courage to step out of the ‘ghettos’ of silence in order to articulate her resistance to the social machinery that works in collusion with her male exploiters. Towards the end of the story, Sugandhi stands up to confront the exploitative forces; she ventures out and refuses to cater to the needs of her callous and double faced male clients. Sugandhi realizes that speaking out against exploitation is the only way to be at peace with her inner self. The critique of the story does not limit itself to grasping the efficiency of ideology through the mechanism of imaginary and symbolic identification. The story gives us a glimpse into the dimension that lies beyond interpellation, the leftover which opens the

space for desire and makes the Other (the Symbolic order) inconsistent.

Manto takes us to the very centre of a sex worker's existence, to her dreary room in the beginning of the story. The squalor of her room reflects the squalid and sordid situation of her life. The room is littered with odds and ends, the back of the only cane chair in the room is dirty from overuse, the black cloth covering the gramophone is in tatters, the mangy dog is resting on dried and withered *chappals*, and the parrot's cage is strewn with stale peels of fruit. Her name 'Sugandhi' meaning 'sweet fragrance' bears a special significance with reference to the conditions of her room as well as her life. The parrot and the dog are her only constant companions. There is a portrait of Lord Ganesha, adorned with fresh and wilted flowers. The presence of oil lamp and incense sticks on a small shelf near the portrait is proof of her faith in the god. Her religious faith provides her an additional sense of security and also the strength to survive in the hostile world. Sugandhi is lying face down on her bed; a thoroughly drunk 'sanitary' inspector of the Municipal Committee has just left her after shaking the ribs and bones of her body. He did not stay for the night because he had "high regards for his wife who loved him a lot" (Manto 165). There is brutality in Sugandhi's encounter with her customers as these men cannot dissociate violence from their sexual acts and hence pinch her blue and black. The bestial treatment meted out by men to Sugandhi suggests that for the patriarchal subject she is a mere object of sexual gratification. Sugandhi tolerates this violent and cruel behaviour as she is forever hungry for love and so melts into submission at the slightest suggestion of warmth from a man.

The relationship between Sugandhi's imaginary identification and symbolical identification is clearly discernible at this point in the story. In her imaginary identification, she certainly identifies with an image of a fragile feminine figure that is capable of arousing the sexual passions of her clients. Since the imaginary identification is always done on behalf of a certain gaze in the other, the gaze here is that of her male clients. She is enacting this feminine image because she wants to appear likeable to her male clients. This interplay of imaginary and symbolic identification works to integrate her into the social and ideological function so that she assumes her symbolic mandates.

The text narrates how Sugandhi has created a make-believe world of love and lies to sustain her existence. She has, right above the table on the wall, four framed pictures of different men who are her regular clients. She thinks that she is in love with all of them. But in reality the men give her only coins and

not love. Madho, a *hawildar* from Pune, manipulates and exploits the situation to his advantage. He lures and deceives her through the use of various tactics. He takes away her earnings by playing a wicked game of husband-wife. He exercises control over Sugandhi not through the use of brute force but he achieves control over her through discourse. He says to her, “Do you realize what you are bargaining for? ...for seven and a half rupees you’re promising to give me such a thing that you cannot give and I have come to take such a thing that I cannot take.” He adds, “I want a woman; but do you, at this moment, want a man?” (Manto 169). He comforts her with his soothing words and provides her the much needed emotional security through his regular visits, unfulfilled promises of financial help and meaningless utterances. Madho, thus, uses her as a tool in order to ease his own life’s burden. Sugandhi is happy to live this lie as there is no possibility of living its truth. Manto describes her situation in these words, “those who cannot get real gold, settle for gold-plated imitations” (Manto 170). It is clear that at this point Sugandhi is fooling herself with her cynicism into thinking that these men are not her clients but her lovers, whereas in her actions she shows effectively that they are her customers. The ideological illusion lies in the reality of what she does, rather than what she thinks.

The moment of realization arrives in Sugandhi’s life when she is rejected with a mere ‘*ooun*’ by a *Seth*, a ‘gentleman’ who has come to the ‘Prostitute Quarters’ in the middle of the night. For the *Seth*, she is an object of desire; her body becomes an object – inspected, surveyed, judged and finally rejected by the buyer. Her sensibility is totally numbed for a moment, but soon she regains her consciousness. These moments of humiliation make her realize the need to demolish the make-believe world, so consciously created and maintained by her. Her rejection by the *Seth* fills her with the feelings of anger and frustration. Her attempts to avenge her insult are thwarted as the *Seth* leaves her in this bewildered state, even before she could comprehend the situation. She feels as if the *Seth* has spat on her face and has said, “ten rupees for this woman, what’s wrong with a mule” (Manto 174). A strong desire to re-enact the whole episode in order to avenge her insult catches hold of her. She wishes that the *Seth* would come to her once again and at the sound of “*ooun*” she would pounce on him like a wild cat and scratch his face with her nails. She would tear her clothes, stand before him stark naked and say, “This is what you came for, didn’t you? Take it without paying the price but what I am, whatever is hidden inside me, neither you nor your father can take that” (Manto 177). She

finds it hard to handle the intensity of her anger and helplessness. “What do I lack?”, she asks this question of each and every object around her.

Sugandhi directs her anger towards Madho, a patriarchal subject who is an epitome of her physical, emotional and economic exploitation at the hands of inconsiderate society. She steps out of her zone of peace, security and silence to confront her exploiter. Sugandhi throws away Madho’s picture out of the window of her room thus snapping all connections with him. The completely docile Sugandhi turns into a strong person and pulls out the pictures of her clients and throws them violently in the street. She rejects them all. She expresses her complete rejection of them with an “*ooun*”. She rejects Madho completely whom she used to refer to as her husband. She laughs and repeats Madho’s dialogues to develop her revenge. She questions Madho’s authority over her and drives him out of her house. She finally wakes up from her self-imposed slumber to voice her silence as she is now prepared to face the truth of her existence.

Thus, towards the end of the story, the movement between symbolic and imaginary identification definitely comes out with a certain leftover. The symbolic mandate bestowed upon Sugandhi gives her a place in the intersubjective network of symbolic relations. But this mandate is ultimately arbitrary because it cannot be accounted for by reference to her real properties and capacities. Her rejection by the *Seth* by a mere ‘ooun’ can be read as an intrusion of the Real in the symbolic order. Sugandhi is automatically confronted with a certain ‘*Che vuoi?*’, the question – Why is she what the big Other is saying that she is? This question is an articulation of her incapacity to fulfill the symbolic identification, to assume fully and without restraint the symbolic mandate. It is thus, the effect and testimony of a failed interpellation. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek mentions that every process of identification conferring on us a fixed socio-symbolic identity is ultimately doomed to fail. The function of ideological fantasy is to mask this inconsistency and thus to compensate us for the failed identification (142). In “Hatak”, Sugandhi finally traverses this fantasy; she experiences how there is nothing behind it and realizes that the fantasy masks precisely this nothing. When she traverses her fantasy, she throws Madho and all other male clients out of her life.

A close reading of “Kali Shalwar” and “Hatak” reveals Manto’s attempts to capture and represent in his fictional narrative the functioning of ideology. He narrates the sufferings of female sex workers through an authentic portrayal

of the miserable plight of these generally excluded members of society. Sultana of “Kali Shalwar” is a cynical subject who is misled by a flawed version of reality but still she is not prepared to dispense with this vision. This story emphasizes the internalization of interpellation by a cynical subject. Sultana has completely accepted her Symbolic mandate without any restraint. On the other hand, Sugandhi of “Hatak” realizes that the Symbolic mandate imposed upon her by the big Other is arbitrary in nature. She acts consciously to disturb this established mode of existence and consequently rejects her Symbolic mandate. Thus, the text presents Sugandhi as an effect and testimony of failed interpellation.

### End Note

<sup>1</sup> All translations of Saadat Hasan Manto’s works are mine.

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