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# Dehumanization and Trauma: A Study of Sajjad Zaheer's "Dulari" and Sa'adat Hasan Manto's "Naked Voices"

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**Abstract.** This paper analyses two short stories, "Dulari" by Sajjad Zaheer and "Naked Voices" by Sa'adat Hasan Manto. These stories project characters who unknowingly violate people they believe they love and are their protectors. The analysis is an attempt to make one aware of the numerous ways through which one violates others both knowingly and unknowingly. The paper tries to elaborate the ways in which it becomes difficult for characters to question their own positions because they are unable to look within their own selves. One way to recognize a person as an individual is to understand or empathise with the conditions in which they have lived and suffered. The paper highlights the characters of the two stories who are subjugated and not understood by people close to them and as a result are left with no one to empathise with. The people who are close to the subjugated characters are not capable of introspection as they take away the dignity of the characters by dehumanising or objectifying them. The paper tries to argue that these characters are not capable of establishing an intersubjective relationship, as they are unable to affirm the subjectivity of another human being. They are also unable to reflect on their own inner processes that lead to such violations.

**Keywords.** dehumanization, trauma, objectification, humiliation, subjugation.

This paper aims to analyse two short stories, Sajjad Zaheer's "Dulari" ("Dulārī" 1932) and Sa'adat Hasan Manto's "Naked Voices" (Nangī Āwāzen 1950).<sup>2</sup> "Dulari" is a short story which explores the intricacies of human

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<sup>2</sup> I have used the English translations of both the stories for this study.

emotions and societal norms. It revolves around Dulari, a young woman trapped in the web of poverty and social stigma. The story reflects the theme of inequality and social injustices. The story presents a critique of social forces that outrightly reject the subjectivity of a person who is marginalised. It reflects the complex inner world of a person who is objectified and dehumanised. In “Naked Voices”, Manto explores the psyche of Bholu who descends into madness as his sense of self and identity get distorted by relentless criticism from the people surrounding him. Bholu experiences extreme psychological stress. He is unable to bear the criticism by his family members which include his close brother and sister-in-law.

Both writers belonged to the All-India Progressive Writer’s Association (AIPWA). The formation of the AIPWA in 1936 started a literary movement which was closely linked to “debates over decolonization and the nature of the postcolonial nation state that was to come into being” (Gopal 2). The writers of the PWA shared the conviction that “art, literature and film could shape and transform the nascent nation state in progressive directions” (Gopal 2). The body of work that came out from the movement was “profoundly literary and inescapably committed to social transformation and nation building” (Gopal 2). The movement tried to reflect “the ideological field of the nation which had exploded into a terrain of struggle for several social and political forces that were organizing around the issues ranging from gender, caste, religion to labour, language and region” (Gopal2).

The analysis in the paper is focussed on interpersonal and intersubjective human relationships. When one reduces the other person in a relationship to an object and dehumanizes him/her the kind of relation which one experiences in these conditions is one of a failed intersubjective relationship where the subjectivity of the other is denied. B. Allan Wallace writes,

In cases of strong attachment, one transfers the very possibility of one’s own happiness onto the object on which one’s mind is bent, thereby disempowering oneself and empowering the object of one’s fancy. Even when such attachment is directed toward another person, it entails more of an ‘intrasubjective’ than an intersubjective relationship, for one is engaging more poignantly with one’s own conceptual superimpositions than with the other person as a genuine subject (Wallace 10).

He adds “When the reality of one’s idealized object of attachment - with all his or her faults and limitations - breaks through one’s fantasies, disillusionment may ensue” (Wallace 10).

To know the kind of violence one perpetrates, one needs to move away from the realm of objectification, i.e. the realm of *I-it*. In his philosophical book, *I and Thou* (1923), Buber says that a human being is capable of uttering two primary words *I-It* and *I- Thou*. Talking about the *I-It* relationship, Buber

says that if a man perceives something, imagines something, feels something or thinks something, he establishes the realm of "It" (Buber 4). The realm of 'It' is responsible for reducing the other person into an object. For a healthy intersubjective relationship, Buber states that the other person should be addressed as a boundless 'Thou', in which the subjectivity of the other is affirmed. He further states that the combination of *I- Thou* should be spoken with "the whole being" (Buber 3).

Jessica Benjamin highlights in her essay, "Recognition and Destruction" the need for a process (in terms of relational theories) which should occur between two subjects rather than within the individual in the intrasubjective domain. The problem she discusses after this is the difficulty the individual subject has in recognizing the 'other' as an equivalent centre of experience, which keeps him stuck in the intrasubjective domain (Benjamin 30). She argues that the human relationships should move beyond realizing that 'where ego is, objects must be' to move further ahead to find 'where objects are, subjects must be' (Benjamin 29).

This paper attempts to look at the meaning of trauma and ways in which it is depicted through the characters in the stories. It looks at the subjugated character's overbearingly strong emotions. The varied emotions felt by human beings result in "Certain overarching emotions" and engulf the human mind "at any given cross-section of time", and though the normal self "appears apparently intact, smooth and well organized but under scrutiny, it reveals a mosaic of discrete experiences" (Basu 218). The discrete experiences remain in flux and cause psychic 'trauma'. Salman Akhtar while defining psychic trauma writes, "Acute trauma results from an internal or external event that stimulates the mind to an unbearable degree where the 'protective shield' is ruptured and affects generated are hard for the ego to cope with, and a state of helplessness results" (209).

"Dulari" focuses on the life of the eponymous character who is a servant. The story revolves around Dulari, a young woman who tirelessly works as a maid enduring exploitation and harsh treatment in an upper class household. She is forced to flee the house twice in which she works as she cannot withstand injustices done to her. She is disturbed by the sharp words and taunts by the various members of the household and is deeply affected by the insincerity and deception of their mannerisms.

In the story, Dulari who in her childhood was free spirited and experienced no worries, goes through multiple processes of oppression which aim to finally turn her into an 'object'. Though she doesn't complain about her poverty, she becomes the subject of ridicule and dehumanisation within the space of the household where she is humiliated by other women servants who look down upon her. The other servants exercise their position of power to ridicule her. Priyamvada Gopal writes that the "contractual nature of the work that these women do, as opposed to Dulari's liege labour allows them to

at the slightest grievance, quarrel and leave” (Gopal 34). Unlike them, Dulari cannot afford to have a choice but must do unending labour. She can never contest her identity as a servant as her position is fixed and she caters to various forms of gendered violations. She suffers predominantly at the hands of Kazim and Haseena Begum in the story. In the story, Zaheer highlights her confined position and brings in the question of honour and double standard of the upper-class elite family. The double standard of the household can be seen through the example that though at home often she would be dressed in filthy clothes and smell bad, but whenever she would accompany Begum Sahiba, she would put on decent clothes so as to not tarnish their honour and hide her own coarseness. Dulari’s position as a servant is bad enough but she undergoes mental and emotional trauma along with being dehumanized and physically exploited.

The primary cause of Dulari’s mental exploitation is Kazim, who fancies himself as a reformer. Kazim articulates against the conservative customs of his household for being age-old – not modern enough but he is not a sincere reformer. Zaheer is critical of how Kazim is actually not a reformer as on one hand he is vocal about the exploitation prevalent in the household but on the other hand he changes his position and immediately adapts and becomes part of the exploitative structure around him. After the union of Kazim and Dulari, Zaheer writes: “The mental and intellectual worlds of these two individuals were as far apart as the sky and the earth are. Yet they found their desires had found a refuge” (13). He writes that they were “drifting on an ocean of dark forces” like “aimless twigs of straw” (13). However, Kazim abruptly deserts and dehumanizes Dulari. Buber in *I and Thou* writes that the actual love is the responsibility of an ‘I’ for a ‘thou’ as the word love ‘constantly involves the affirmation of the being addressed’. When it comes to address the being of Dulari, Kazim is first compelled to either reject his upper class morality, or her. It is worth noticing that since Kazim is an educated individual, his existence as a ‘reformist’ depends as much on Dulari’s existence, as Dulari’s existence depends upon Kazim’s tokens of benevolence. The study of the two subjective worlds of Kazim and Dulari is vital to study how love is converted to violence. Love as a process doesn’t happen between two subjects but rather happens within the individual, i.e. in an ‘intrasubjective’ domain. In the story Kazim’s ego doesn’t allow Dulari to have an equivalent centre of self. In his love relationship with Dulari, Kazim attains absolute control and an extreme polar position. He dehumanizes Dulari and tries to relate to Dulari as an ‘object’ but never allows his self to find Dulari. He doesn’t want to find her as another subject worthy of being a distinct subject. Kazim’s ‘self-absoluteness’ in his relationship to Dulari is equivalent to narcissism. This narcissist tendency stems from his position in an upper-class family. Kazim does not understand that in an intersubjective relationship, one needs to recognise the constant tension between recognizing the other and asserting the self simultaneously. He, on the

contrary, decides to dehumanize Dulari and desert her completely when he marries someone else. This act alone annihilates her and the dream she had of marrying Kazim someday is crushed. Therefore, she decides to flee the house for the first time. Being rejected in Kazim's subjectivity, Dulari feels ashamed and dehumanized and it brings about an objectification of Dulari's self, which equals a "psychical death, being a petrified or dead soul" (Karlsson and Sjoberg 354).

Writing about Progressive fiction and drama in *Literary Radicalism in India*, Priyamvada Gopal says that the story is full of "upper class women who are either willingly exploitative or naively benevolent; the paterfamilias for whom domestic matters are too small to be of concern; and the young man whose reformist ambitions are most honoured by caddish breaches of trust" (34). She also writes that Dulari's subjectivity is one of the subjectivities which "emerge insistently to disrupt the narratives that seem to determine their lives" (34). Dulari first didn't choose to return to the household. It is only four months later after being convinced by an old servant's argument that she finally returns. She however, attributes power to Kazim's family as she sits, almost hidden in a corner. In the story, Haseena Begum who had been her friend during their childhood cannot understand how her situation got better after fleeing the house for the first time. She is filled with disgust and "ruminates in her blind, though well meaning, self-righteousness" (Jalil 125). She doesn't even go near her after she returns. She has developed a perspective where she identifies the degraded sense of the human self but can never identify Dulari's humiliation and exploitation in her own household. She resembles Kazim as she also has been educated, and like him she too cannot develop a self-critical lens and therefore remains apathetic towards recognizing Dulari's appalling position. Her bewilderment towards Dulari's real situation confirms her indifference. Zaheer is mocking her conditioned response which makes her feel sympathetic when she says that god eventually accepts the sins of wrongdoers. She does not recognize how by alienating herself from Dulari and by giving herself the position of a *sahibzaadi* who can talk about the fortune of a servant and decide what "matters" to her, she is inflicting violence on her 'being' and dehumanizing her. She also proposes that she should get married to one of the servants in the household. In this case, it can be argued that she is dismissive of Dulari and has no insight into issues related to class and poverty. The hypocrisy for the household is represented when Zaheer writes: "While it was true that her reputation has been completely destroyed, it was not as significant a loss for a servant as it would have been for a respectable woman" (Alvi and Chauhan 15). Haseena Begum's mother is a harsher version of Haseena Begum and she feels victorious when Dulari comes back. She humiliates her by calling her an immodest woman who has lost her honour. It is worth noticing how honour comes into this context, as holding a position of a servant in an elite household, the household had never before thought of her honour.

Dulari flees the house twice. For the second time because she sees that it is a better option than to survive the atrocities in the household but before fleeing the house for the second time, she has to witness humiliation and experience shame. Shame is a deeper emotion than guilt and leads to a more pathological state as it is related to one's mode of being. If shame appears to be due to an action, as in the case of Dulari's dehumanization and humiliation, "the feeling of shame is not about the action in itself but is about a revealed self" (Karlsson and Sjöberg 352). In Dulari's case, when her "self" gets exposed, there is no one to receive it. Shame concerns a self that somehow is always there, although often "hidden and unrevealed" (Karlsson and Sjöberg 350). When all the family members gather to humiliate her, it must be noticed that Dulari does not feel humiliated until Kazim comes out with his wife. After seeing Kazim's wife, Dulari feels the horror of his betrayal and wishes for her disappearance from the situation. In the story, Kazim's gaze is away from Dulari when he addresses the rest of the family. Kazim further decides to utter uncompassionate words about the punishment that she has already got when he says, "Ammi, for God's sake, leave the unfortunate girl alone. She has been punished enough. Can't you see her condition?" (Alvi and Chauhan 16). The earlier experiences of shame resurface in Dulari and her objectification contributes to the heightening of the bodily experience of shame. The body becomes the portal through which shame is experienced. The experience of shame "manifests" and "reveals" itself through the body (Karlsson and Sjöberg 349). The rest of the family watches Dulari like a tainted being with a sense of superiority. Zaheer writes, "The vultures preying on the dead bodies of animals do not realize that the defenceless body into which they jab their foul beaks are, despite being dead, better than those who are alive" (Alvi and Chauhan 16). Shame results in the disclosure of an unidentified self, a stout feminine figure in Dulari, but at the same time she knows that a most private part of herself is getting exposed and this generates a feeling of extreme humiliation in her. Nonetheless, it results in a heightened sense of "self-awareness" (Karlsson and Sjöberg 350). In Dulari's case, there's an immediate relationship between the disclosed self and the act of humiliation that points to this disclosed self. Her shame goes through her humiliation to her being. She feels identified with the exposed self in shame where identification is to be comprehended in terms of either "imprisoned," or "condemned" (Karlsson and Sjöberg 352).

The configuration of Dulari's self is different from those of the others in the story as she is subjected to feel certain overarching emotions of shame which engulf her mind. In Dulari's case there is also a sense of distortion, a sense of disbelief at what is happening. After she sees Kazim with his wife, she couldn't withstand the sight of Kazim together with his wife as it invokes the trauma of his betrayal. She is unable to share her emotions with others. It should be noted that the much-heralded withdrawal as a reaction to trauma is not actual withdrawal of the psyche, but an abstention from reporting,

which results in silence and “psychical death” (Karlsson and Sjöberg 354). The hurdle associated with Dulari’s coming out of the constructed silence is her insecurity related to her being overpowered, dehumanized, devoured and destroyed in all interpersonal relationships apart from those which have already devoured and traumatized her. With the confusion and instability attached to her identity, it is highly improbable that she could recover without the active support from the “other.”

Sa’adat Hasan Manto, in “Naked Voices” portrays the harrowing experience of a character who gets stripped of his identity as a “man”. In the story, Bholu is subjected to multiple jarring experiences that lead to his believe that he is not a man. Unable to cope with his traumatic experiences, he descends into madness. The story highlights the issue of privacy for the working class. The story highlights the plight of working-class men and raises the questions surrounding their dilemmas. Manto raises the issue of the public and the private and through the character of Bholu raises two significant concerns in the story, i.e. of how the private gets created by the public and how the public gets influenced by the private. The story deals with Bholu’s character who interiorizes the gaze of the ‘public’ and suffers whereas the ‘public’ remains ignorant and unaffected about his private, emotional turmoil as he experiences traumatic events. The narrator praises Bholu for his steadfastness, and yet in contrast shows how in the eyes of his brother, his friends and the larger society he is made a laughing stock, for deviating from the ideal of masculinity. What the story subtly captures is the castration anxiety that Bholu eventually suffers from, the anxiety that he is not a man after all. And all this apparently happens through the power of these feeble yet very powerful voices. It is these voices that castrate him. The story depicts the power of these intrusive, naked voices in perpetrating trauma. Even though he has power, he does not feel powerful. The chaperones of this power are other people to whom he has to validate his masculinity, or else he faces repercussions (Kimmel).

Manto explores the lives of refugee workers for whom there was no proper accommodation. The reason why the public’s gaze is so stern in the story is because the refugee workers do not have any choice but to allow their fellow workers to intrude upon their privacy. It is through the body that one experiences one’s being. If a foreign force intrudes the body, the being gets disrupted. Through Bholu’s case, Manto in the story highlights the power of the stern public gaze which causes trauma, shame and humiliation. This public gaze can be perceived as the all-inclusive power. This invisible and yet all pervasive gaze of other fellow workers has a major role to play in the life and the situation in which the workers are placed. In the story the lack of agency makes them unable to claim their own bodies. The story traces the disillusionment that Bholu undergoes. He struggles against the external power structures and experiences disassociation with his body (Foucault). This results in prolonged anxiety which ultimately makes him inept. In the

story, Bholu cannot acquire any outlet for his anxiety as he cannot share it with anyone. Instead, he feels shameful and unwittingly tortures and humiliates himself. The bodily shame that he experiences becomes the reason why his body becomes the site of resistance and makes him impotent. The story traces how the private is affected when the outer gaze (the public) enters the body. The short story traces the trajectory of numerous complementing events that lead to Bholu's experience of trauma and depicts the ways in which he suffers alone.

Manto has developed Bholu as someone who is shy and extremely self-conscious. This is in stark contrast with the way in which the working class is generally represented in literature. In the story the two brothers, Gama and Bholu, who earn their money through hard labour, can spend the winter in the close confines of the four walls in their tiny room but with the advent of summer, they have to shift to the rooftop. In the story, Bholu decides to get married after listening to strange, intrusive 'voices' on the rooftop, which have disturbed his sleep for fifteen nights. The shift in consciousness happens because the acts which he thinks should remain private are rendered public in the context of these semi-homeless people. Bholu fails to comprehend how these people can allow the outer public gaze to penetrate deep personal relationships. It causes major anxiety in him. Subsequently, Bholu gets teased by Gama's drunken friends who think he is getting entertained while listening to sensual 'voices' on the rooftop while in reality Bholu can't stand these intrusive voices. The allegation by Gama's friends affects Bholu deeply and adds to his trauma, anxiety and frustration. Manto seems to suggest that in most of these people a certain disassociation with their bodies has taken place. Somewhere they have completely reconciled with the intrusion as they actually have no real choice given their life situation. In the story, Bholu feels trapped and finds himself unready to marry. He is further petrified of all the fuss that would follow if he chooses to run away from the wedding.

Eventually in the story, Bholu gets married but his anxiety grows intense. He senses that everyone around him in the vicinity collectively produces the sound of a muffled laughter. He cannot even talk to his wife as he finds the whisperings to be too intrusive. He feels that the cots around him have begun to speak, even the sound of a glass being knocked against a pot by the sweet-maker's daughter Shanda, is unbearable to him. Though the cold breeze that he encounters in the morning rekindles the feeling of relief in him but this feeling sustains shortly.

Bholu remains uneasy and it results in a double burden on him where he himself thinks that people around him are not worth listening to but at the same time he is unable to eliminate their voices from his head. When someone tries to engage him in a conversation, he chooses to silently resign. In the story, the voices return and disturb him to an extent that the anxiety that he feels leaves him with only one question, "What has happened to me?" (52).



The two traumatic nights, after which he has lost his sense of self, pushes him to send his wife back to her parents' home. He again becomes silent when Gama asks about his action as he doesn't want to express his anxiety to him as he is convinced that he won't understand it.

When Bholu hears the voice of his sister-in-law talking to Gama, implying that he is not masculine enough, he reaches a breaking point and feels that his identity and being are being "put in a pestle and mortar" and someone has ground it to "smithereens" (Manto 53). Gama's assertion regarding Bholu's masculinity is "terrible" and feels as if he is being stabbed with a "knife" by him. The conversation was not meant to be heard by Bholu. Unfortunately, his sister-in-law and Gama both are unaware of Bholu's already annihilated self which further gets traumatised and tarnished. The only act of physical violence in the story is done by Kallan who hits Bholu with a rod making him unconscious. The act is rendered futile in the chain of events as Bholu's being has already been violated. The physical act of violence by Kallan further marginalizes the psychological trauma of Bholu. At this point, the gaze of the society has become so intrusive and unbearable for Bholu that he can't help but descend into madness. He becomes mad and keeps shredding the sack curtains superficially constructed to keep the public gaze away. The reason he finds shredding the sack curtains important is to reduce the psychic pain that he is undergoing (Jones).

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