

## Unseen Bodies: Sexuality and Subordination in Manto's "Blouse"

Samiksha | Jawaharlal Nehru University

<https://ellids.com/archives/2024/12/6.2-Samiksha.pdf>

**Abstract** | Domestic servants are shadowy yet ubiquitous presences in upper and middle-class homes in the Indian subcontinent. Separated by socio-economic divisions and hierarchies, the unavoidability of proximity between bodies from different social strata inhabiting the same domestic space often creates tensions over possibilities of cross-class intimacies. This paper, through a close reading of Saadat Hasan Manto's short story, "Blouse," examines how bodies—as sites of budding sexuality—located in structures of servitude, experience and navigate the changing contours of the self and the other. The paper focuses on how conditions of invisibilisation, which characterise the servant's position, on one hand produce effects of marginalisation and exclusion, but on the other hand also engender conditions for the servant to observe, encounter, and experience the other in such an intimate manner that it often threatens to disrupt the carefully maintained relations of social difference. The paper attempts to understand how different bodies behave and engage with each other—through relations of indifference, fascination, and deprecation—while navigating the complex terrain of gender performativity and class politics in the private space of home.

**Keywords** | Body, Class, Gender, Adolescent Sexuality, Domestic Servant, Servitude, Socio-economic Divide, Indian Household, Saadat Hasan Manto

Bodies can be pitilessly demanding and powerfully disruptive. Playing a crucial role in the formation of selfhoods, social identities, and other processes of being and becoming, bodies are central to an individual's world-making process. This paper is an attempt to explore the significance of inter-relations between bodies that occupy a space of proximity but are divided and differentiated by vast social disparities, through a close reading of Saadat Hasan Manto's short story, "Blouse." The space of the home and the status of servant are employed as two critical lenses to focus on the meanings and effects bodies—located at the intersections of class, gender, and sexuality—produce in their engagements with other people, spaces, and objects within the precincts of the middle-class domestic sphere. Using Kimberle Crenshaw's theoretical framework of intersectionality, the paper seeks to understand how bodies, occupying what Ann Mattis terms as "the contact zone of domestic service" (2), imbibe, resist, navigate, and, in the process, reconfigure structures of marginalisation and subordination.

Most of the critical attention given to Manto's work focuses on "the more virulent and shocking aspects of his writing" (Daruwalla 57), directed either toward his portrayal of the violence and brutality of partition or the stories that saw him being summoned to the court on charges of depiction of "obscenity." What has been overlooked in these critical commentaries on the literary oeuvre of one of Urdu literature's finest writers are his stories on the ordinary and the quotidian. One such story by Manto is "Blouse," which is categorised as one of the "minor stories" by Leslie Flemming on account of a lack of the "significant and powerful themes of Manto's best stories" (55). This paper, arguing on the contrary, proposes to show that Manto's depiction of the registers of everyday life is as significant, both in terms of its aesthetic and political implications, as his literary engagements with the more momentous events in history. Manto's story "Blouse" is about a young boy named Momin who works as a domestic servant in a deputy *saab*'s<sup>1</sup> house. Having recently entered into the adolescent stage of his life, the story revolves around the changes Momin experiences in his body and mind, regarding his sense of self and his association with others. He particularly finds his perspective towards the eldest daughter of his employer's family, Shakeela, changing. He encounters newfound pleasure in looking at her body, talking to her, and finding occasions to spend time around her. Given the social gulf between them, Momin's growing desires for Shakeela do not find a 'legitimate' outlet and get concentrated around the blouse that Shakeela is stitching, which, due to the symbolic charge it acquires, emerges as central to the characters, the narrator, and the readers of the story.

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<sup>1</sup>*Saab* is the shortened form of the honorific term *Sahib* commonly used in South Asia to denote respect and social superiority.

Momin, stepping into adolescence, finds it difficult to make sense of the changes his body is undergoing. Unable to decipher their origin, meaning, and effects, a strong sense of uncertainty and anxiety overwhelms him. What particularly distresses him is the unpredictable nature of these changes as he is neither able to comprehend nor control his own body. Unaware of the nuances and complexities of adolescent sexuality, a sense of helplessness and confusion unsettles the life Momin has known and has been used to. The body plays a crucial role in a subject's organisation of the world around them. Michael Polanyi noted that "Every time we make sense of the world, we rely on our tacit knowledge of impacts made by the world on our body and the complex responses of our body to these impacts" (147–148). Given the significant influence of body in shaping an individual's perceptions and experiences, the changes in Momin's body extend beyond its corporeal boundaries, necessitating corresponding shifts in his conception of self, engagement with his work, and his inter-personal relations. Momin tries to assuage the surging tension and strange sensations in his body through different means he could find around him. He stands barefoot to let the vibrations produced by the pounding of spices run through his body; another time he tries hanging from a hook in the wall to stretch his body, but finds little respite in these misplaced attempts. His efforts at exploring the intimate parts of his body in private also end up with him feeling ashamed and frustrated over his actions (Manto 18).

The inner turmoil that Momin goes through and the challenges it poses to his selfhood and identity need to be placed in the context of the social location he finds himself placed in. As a domestic servant in deputy *saab*'s house, Momin's work requires him to spend most of his time inside his employer's home. He helps with the household chores and runs small errands for the mistress and her two daughters—Shakeela and Razia. The only other person in the house with whom Momin has some contact is the old lady who works in the kitchen. It must be noted that the household space where Momin spends most of his time, both working and residing, is largely occupied by women. Gender, noted as one of the most visible and significant subdivisions of human society (Weisgram et al. 778), plays a defining role in the subject's understanding, experimentation, and expression of their sexual behaviour. In contrast to pubescent girls, where signs of approaching adulthood invite increased vigilance and regulations (Kågesten et al. 3), the development of adolescent sexuality in boys is largely affirmed by the patriarchal structures of the society. This initiation into manhood is accompanied by "greater freedom to move outside of the household and engage in leisure activities while also facing increased exposures to environmental risks as well as expectations to work and help support the family financially" (3). Many cultures and societies mark this stage with specific rites and rituals that work as "ceremonial markers of passage from one social stage to another, serving functionally to ease the transition" (Norbeck et al. 478). James L. Brain observes that "initiation rites cannot be considered in isolation, but must be viewed as part of a general human concern with categorization, with order and disorder" (192). One of the major functions that initiation ceremonies—such as *bar mitzvah* in Judaism, *metatah* ceremony in Hindu Balinese community, and *bismillah* ceremonies observed in South Asian Muslim communities<sup>2</sup>—perform is to mitigate the

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<sup>2</sup>*Bar mitzvah* is a Jewish coming-of-age ceremony performed when a boy turns thirteen, marked by a special synagogue service where the adolescent assumes his religious responsibilities; *Metatah* is a tooth-filling ceremony performed for Hindu Balinese to mark a young person's transition towards adulthood;

uncertainty, confusion, and instability that characterise the liminal nature of any transition stage.

The practices and rituals that mark this transition into adulthood also become an essential means through which young men are equipped with the knowledge about social roles and cultural values concerning gender and sexuality that come with their changed status and identity (Smith 4), and provide the “help to establish a sense of social-emotional anchorage for the growing individual” (Cohen 5). Such processes of socialisation, often performed by an exclusively male social circle which may include parents, siblings, cousins, and friends, mostly belonging to the same gender cohort (Ferreira 217), are also crucial for providing the adolescent male subject with a sense of belonging to their immediate community in light of the new developments and relationships that now characterise their place in it. This social space, crucial in situating and channelling the newly emerging desires, changes, and apprehensions of young men in established socio-cultural structures, plays a critical role in the development of the male sexual self. Momin, on account of the nature and requirements of his role as a domestic servant in a female-dominated household, lacks this circle of male companionship where he could open up about his predicament and seek answers to his misgivings. The images and longings that crop up in Momin’s mind are also heavily influenced by the domestic environment in which he is placed. His misplaced projections of his bodily desires on the household setting around him are reflected in the strange urges he experiences such as a yearning for his body to be grounded like spices in a cauldron, for plates arranged on the table to start flying, and for the lid of the kettle to shoot up in the sky (Manto 20).

Most of Momin’s interactions with others in the house revolve around performing domestic chores. Any other conversations between Momin and his employer’s family members are not very frequent; defined and delimited by the class disparities and hierarchies between them. Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum in their seminal work *Cultures of Servitude: Modernity, Domesticity, and Class in India* note that domestic service in Indian middle-class homes is premised upon a culture of servitude which they define as:

one in which social relations of domination/subordination, dependency, and inequality are normalized and permeate both the domestic and public spheres [...] these social relations are legitimized ideologically such that domination, dependency, and inequality are not only tolerated but accepted; and [...] are reproduced through everyday social interaction and practice. (3–4)

The narrator of the story notes that one of the reasons why nobody in the household noticed the changes Momin undergoes is because of his social status: “Who could pay that much attention to the lives of servants? They covered all life’s stages on foot, from infancy to old age, and those around them never knew anything of it” (Manto 20). Attempts at invisibilisation of the servant subject by ensuring that they remain unobtrusive and peripheral presences are essential to what Ray and Qayum have noted as the process of naturalisation of the relations of inequality and domination, reaffirmed and reproduced through everyday household practices in Indian middle-class homes.

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*Bismillah* ceremony is observed in some Muslim communities of the Indian subcontinent to mark the beginning of a child’s initiation into education.

Momin, though he had been recently employed, was hardworking and, hence, was liked by everyone in the house. With the growing restlessness and anxiety that had taken hold of him, Momin found it difficult to work as efficiently as before but the narrator observes that "despite his listlessness, he hadn't become lazy, which was why no one in the house was aware of his inner turmoil" (Manto 19). It is interesting to note that Momin's presence in the household is visible and valued only in terms of his role and function as a servant. It is only when some disruption is caused in the normal functioning of the household that other aspects of a servant's life become apparent to the employers, suggesting that the middle-class's conception of the servant's identity and selfhood remain restricted to the concerns of domestic employment. Since Momin does not let his feelings of unrest and distress affect his tasks and duties, the other members of the household remain wilfully oblivious to the newly emerging aspects and concerns of his personal life.

Historically, in the Indian subcontinent, gender has been the defining axis in the segregation of social spaces (Chatterjee 239). The public sphere has been seen as the domain to be dominated by men, inclined towards and engaged in concerns of commerce, politics, technology, etc., whereas women have been positioned as "naturally" belonging to the private space of home to look after households and families. Momin's position as a male domestic servant needs to be looked at in the light of this larger discourse on gender based division and categorisation of people, spaces, and work. The consolidation of an individual's identity based on gender and sexuality is significantly shaped by the nature of work they find themselves involved in (Hai 2). Occupying the inner realms of home for long periods of time, whether it be for work or leisure, has been traditionally considered to have emasculating effects on men. The traditional constructions of masculinity primarily locate the male identity in relation to spaces of waged employment that are clearly segregated from the domestic sphere (Smith and Winchester 328). Linda McDowell's observation that "the very definition of hegemonic masculinity in industrial capitalist societies is bound up with labour market participation" (17) foregrounds the importance of the workplace in the constitution of distinct gender roles and relations.

Men working as domestic servants, particularly under the supervision of women, is seen as an extremely degrading situation for the former as not only do they have to perform household chores—work seen as suited to a gender beneath theirs—but in doing so they have to follow instructions and take orders from a woman, amounting to a scenario of double humiliation. This is one of the main reasons why male domestic servants have historically been seen as effeminate men. Ray and Qayum observe that the narratives of the male servants they interviewed for their study were heavy with a "bitterness about their compromised masculinity" (23). Given that a deep sense of subservience underlies the position of a domestic servant, the male servant often struggles to adjust to the demands of their work (designated as feminine and unproductive) with the traditional ideals of masculinity (136). Shakeela and Razia's behaviour towards Momin is not only shaped by the class difference between them but also in terms of his position as a male who resides and works for the female occupants in the domestic sphere. In addition to the callousness and ridicule evident in the sisters' interactions with Momin (Manto 25), it is particularly the intimate and indiscreet manner in which Shakeela presents and displays her body in Momin's attendance (23) that indicates that the latter

is not seen in terms of the threat and potency that would be associated with hegemonic masculinity in a similar scenario.

Struggling with navigating the changes that accompany the onset of puberty, Momin finds his attitude towards Shakeela changing. Shakeela, preoccupied with stitching a perfectly fitting blouse for herself, frequently calls on Momin to carry out small errands. In this process, Momin discovers his growing feelings of attraction and fascination for her. When Shakeela takes off her shirt to take measurements for the blouse, Momin, seeing her only in her white vest, experiences “a strange jolt” (Manto 22), although he had seen her like that on many occasions previously. It must be noted that the social hierarchy between them continues to inform Momin’s changing feelings for Shakeela; for instance, on experiencing new sensations when he sees Shakeela in the vest, he immediately averts his eyes (22). In addition to Shakeela’s complete absorption and involvement in the process of stitching a blouse that perfectly fits her body, the blouse also becomes an obsessive concern for Momin, as well as an important focal point for the narrator of the story. What particularly stands out in this process of stitching the blouse is Shakeela’s body. Her body is foregrounded in the narrative on two fronts—one, the body as it is involved in the process of stitching the blouse, and second, the body for which the blouse is being finally prepared. Shakeela spends much effort and time making sure that the satin blouse turns out to have the same design and fit that she has in her mind. Meticulously occupied in perfecting every little detail, the narrator describes Shakeela’s work as marked by “great care and composure” (21).

Shakeela’s body, particularly, as it is involved in the process of making the blouse, is conspicuous in the display of calmness and control with which it carries out the stitching work: “She would turn its wheel with two or three fingers, slowly and cleanly, her wrist gently arched. Her neck would bend forward slightly, and a lock of hair, unable to find a fixed place, would slip down. She would be so absorbed with her work that she wouldn’t push it away” (Manto 21). Here, Shakeela’s body appears in stark contrast to Momin’s restless and jittery body. Calm and self-possessed, her body parts work in remarkable harmony to stitch the blouse with absolute precision. She sends Momin over to the neighbour’s house to borrow their tape measure as her own had turned old and faded. Shakeela had other blouses to check the fit but she decides to take fresh measurements to avoid any lapses (21). Shakeela’s consuming concern over getting the exact measurements and designing the right style suggests a body that can be accurately measured, demarcated, and is deserving of the finest of fits. In contrast to Shakeela’s body that is calm, self-possessed, and well attended to, stands Momin’s restless, disoriented, and isolated body, who helplessly struggles to understand and contain the unexpected changes happening to it. The difference in these bodies needs to be understood in terms of the different social identities they carry. A working-class individual like Momin cannot afford the privilege of time, effort, and investment spent in acquiring ease and knowledge, both intimate and social, about his body. The only possibility available to bodies located on the margins like Momin’s is to admire and assist bodies like Shakeela’s placed at the center by virtue of their social location. Shakeela’s indifference and insensitivity towards a subordinate body is both a consequence and reaffirmation of this social difference that demarcates both the bodies.

The lack of agency that Momin feels on account of the unforeseen changes his body undergoes as it transitions into adulthood is further augmented by the deep social subordination that characterises a servant's place in a middle-class domestic space. The nature of domestic servitude in the Indian subcontinent is such that it severely curtails the agency of the servant who has to every day engage with the expectations and practices based on "servility, self-abasement, ingratiation, subordination, [and] indignity" (Hai 6). The uncertainty and anxiety that accompany adolescence tend to further intensify Momin's already precarious condition in terms of the little control he has over himself and his surroundings. The servant placed as an outsider-insider in the employer's house occupies a liminal position. As a class other, the servant never fully belongs, but as one familiar and proximate with the household space and its inhabitants, is also never a complete outsider. In Momin's case, the complexities that he faces in navigating this position of in-betweenness in deputy *saab*'s household are further complicated by another liminal stage he all of sudden finds himself in—the transition stage between childhood and adulthood. The image of Momin standing at the doorway while Razia is taking measurements for Shakeela, "waiting out the uncomfortable silence" (Manto 22), perfectly captures the uneasiness and anguish of a self placed on the threshold, both literally and metaphorically, negotiating with the complex demands of body, sexuality, and structures of social hierarchies.

The act of the stitching of the blouse is described in great detail in the story. Shakeela first makes the paper cut-outs of the blouse sample, then copies the design on the fabric to avoid any errors, gets another tape measure from the neighbour to prevent any lapses in measurement (Manto 21), scolds Razia for not measuring her body properly (22), patiently puts preliminary stitches to estimate the fit, and then begins the final stitching of the blouse (26). The attentive, meticulous, and immersive manner in which Shakeela carries out the stitching seems to produce an aura around the blouse which extends to the body for which it is being prepared and which will finally wear it, foregrounding and enhancing the presence and the value of that body. Momin, seeing Shakeela's fond involvement in stitching a new article of clothing for herself, opens his trunk to inspect his own newly stitched clothes for Eid. While doing this, he feels a sudden impulse to present himself in his new clothes to Shakeela. Momin considers channelising his attraction towards Shakeela by placing himself in the same economy in which she is so fondly involved—an economy where the body, decked in new clothes, becomes the center of attention and admiration. However, Momin's desire for his body—and through that, aspects of his self and identity beyond his status as a servant—to be seen and acknowledged are callously cut short by Shakeela. When Momin coyly tells her that he was thinking of asking for money from the mistress to buy a silk handkerchief as it will look good with his new Eid outfit, both Razia and Shakeela burst out laughing (Manto 25). The sisters' reaction indicates that Momin's aspiration to place himself in a similar economy of desire and adulation as them is seen as a possibility that can only evoke surprise and ridicule from their end. Still laughing, Shakeela tells Momin that she will strangle him with the same silk handkerchief that he is thinking of tying around his neck (25). It is important to note that both the sisters laugh at Momin, and not with him. Shakeela's comments, though meant as a joke, work to show Momin his place as a social subordinate, indicating the potency of asymmetries of power relations in everyday interactions between social unequals.

Given the nature of domestic work, proximity between employers and servants is often unavoidable as both occupy the same space of the middle-class home. Ann Mattis notes that the contact zone of domestic service, which is “fraught with social anxieties over interclass relations,” offers “a fluid range of social possibilities brought on by the disturbing proximity of servants and their employing families” (32). Mattis argues that the contradictions and ambivalences that characterise this contact zone are crucial since “[t]hese spaces of ambivalence challenge, if only momentarily, ‘dominant life narratives’ that naturalize privatized intimacy and racist hegemony under capitalism” (33). Similarly, the indifference and invisibilisation that characterises Momin’s position in the contact zone between him and Shakeela, also create certain conditions for him to encounter moments of intimacies that transgress the norms and practices of class division and other forms of social hierarchy. It is precisely this kind of intimacy in the domestic space that allows Shakeela to remove her shirt and take her body measurements in just a vest in the presence of Momin. She holds her breath and pushes out her breasts for Razia to measure her chest while Momin is waiting in the room to take the measuring tape back to the neighbours (Manto 22–23). Shakeela gives Momin her vest, still damp with sweat and smelling of her body odour—something that Momin finds very pleasing—to take it to the shop to ask for the price of similar vests (25). The ease with which Shakeela engages with her body—sizing it up, measuring its parts, revealing it in an intimate fashion such that Momin catches a glimpse of the tuft of black hair in her armpit (23)—in a male presence is not perceived by her as a threat or a source of anxiety; rather, she stays absolutely unperturbed by Momin’s proximity to her body, engendered by his assistance in the stitching process. It is interesting to note that Shakeela does not see a marginalised subject like Momin as someone who would possess the “power of the gaze” (Stewart 186). For Shakeela, Momin’s subordinate status as a servant reduces his subject position to an almost inconsequential and impotent presence, further diminished by the emasculation that is associated with a man working in the domestic sphere.

Crenshaw’s introduction to the concept of intersectionality in context of the violence experienced by women of colour as shaped by the interwoven nature of their gender and racial location could be extended to understand how other forms of marginalisation are a result of intersections between a subject’s different identities and social relations in which they are situated. The significance of intersectionality lies in “the need for multiplex epistemologies [that] must treat social positions as relational” (Phoenix and Pattynama 187). Crenshaw’s emphasis on “the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed” (1245) allows one to see how tensions and confluence between different social, political, and economic identities and categories shape an individual’s experiences. The fact that no one in Deputy *Saab*’s household considers the sisters’ proximity with a non-kin male presence as disconcerting is precisely because Momin’s gender identity and its effects are inextricably intertwined with his class and professional identity which works to (partially) curb the male privilege and power sanctioned and sustained by the patriarchal structures of society. The fact that Shakeela thinks little about attributing male sexual agency to a subject rooted so deeply in structures of servitude, allows Momin to observe, access, and engage with the sisters and the space they occupy in a relatively unhindered manner. His employers’ nonchalance towards Momin becomes crucial in enabling him to observe and interact with bodies that are distanced from his by social hierarchies yet



brought close through certain relations of proximity that develop in the contact zone of domestic service. These intimate conditions between social unequals may open up possibilities for transgression and, consequently, reconfiguration of the relations of difference and distinction based on class, gender, and sexuality. The sustained close contact that Momin is able to have with Shakeela is what allows him to center the experience of his sexual awakening around his employer's daughter despite the social gulf between them.

Cultural context and social identities heavily modulate and differentiate the expression of sexual behaviour and practices (Drury and Bukowski 120). Due to the socio-economic inequalities that characterise the employer-servant relationship, Momin finds it difficult to express his feelings for Shakeela. His repressed desires, given the lack of reciprocity from Shakeela and strict social inhibitions, get transferred to the satin blouse that she is stitching for herself. Momin finds himself drawn to the brightness and smoothness of the violet satin cloth from which the blouse is being made, feeling an urge "not just to touch, but to caress its soft, silky surface with his rough fingers" (Manto 27). Having saved some scraps of the satin cloth while cleaning the room, Momin pulls out its threads. While rubbing and pressing these soft strings in his hands, he wonders if Shakeela's armpit hair would also be so soft (27). Momin, feeling confused and anxious over his newly emerging desires for Shakeela, finds some gratification in observing and touching the blouse which is designed to fit her body so perfectly that it almost becomes an extension of Shakeela's body itself. When she finally puts on the stitched blouse to see herself in the mirror, Momin feels as if the blouse has come alive. His eyes gaze on "the long curve and full depth of her spine" visible due to the close fitting of the blouse (27). He exclaims over her excellent craftsmanship, but Shakeela hardly pays any attention to him and rushes out of the room to get Razia's opinion. The image of Momin "left gazing at the mirror, in which the blouse's dark and bright reflection lingered for a while" (28) captures the poignancy of the fleeting contact that Momin can have with someone like Shakeela since the social distance between them prevents this proximity from turning into intimacy.

Bodies can be obliging, discomfoting, curious, unpredictable, agreeable, and rebellious. Momin's body in the story emerges as an important site that fosters rethinking about a (embodied) self located at the margins of the middle-class domestic economy. By engendering changes and disruption, the body presses the subject to reconsider and reconceptualise his own identity and inter-personal relationships. Reined and restricted by social hierarchies and structures of servitude, the demands and desires of Momin's adolescent body struggle to find other ways of expression and fulfillment. It is not only Momin's efforts at understanding the changes happening to him that influence his experience of sexual awakening, but equally important are the conditions of invisibilisation and subordination that the servant subject is situated in and navigates through in his everyday life at a middle-class urban domesticity. These play a crucial role in shaping the meanings and effects that working-class sexuality embodies in relations of cross-class proximity. Momin's simultaneous experiences, as an embodied subject, of both servitude and adolescence, are shaped by the contradictory co-existence of distance and proximities, differences and intimacies, conformity and resistance/subversion that constitute the relations of asymmetrical dependencies between employers and servants. Momin's body, in its engagement with the subject himself and through its interactions

with other bodies, engenders critical conditions where corporeality, intersecting with the social forces of class, gender, and sexuality, acquires new significance, exhorting us to rethink about the complexities of bodies located at the margins.



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