

# She Laughs, She Speaks: *Écriture Féminine* in Manto's Story "The Insult"

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## Abstract

Saadat Hasan Manto in his story, "The Insult," portrays Saugandhi as a prostitute who is capable of speaking of her choices, yet she speaks in a language designed by a patriarchal system that can be read as "phallogocentric" from Hélène Cixous' perspective of poststructuralist feminism. Saugandhi's desire to be loved by a man confines her to the passive, non-speaking position that this "phallogocentric" system has fixed for women in the Lacanian structure of the Symbolic Order. However, the rejection by a customer one night rids her of the desire for patriarchal recognition. She starts speaking in a language new to the phallogocentric system which upsets Madho, who is portrayed by Manto as a speaker of that phallogocentric language. In the last conversation with Madho, Saugandhi laughs hysterically and that threatens Madho with the fear of losing control over her. Manto writes her laughter as her language, which can be analyzed by Cixous' idea of *écriture féminine*. With a qualitative approach, this paper examines how Manto, through the portrayal of Saugandhi, writes a deconstructive language that decentralizes the phallogocentric structure in Urdu short fiction and contributes to the *écriture féminine* in the subculture of Urdu stories even before the phrase was coined.

**Keywords:** *écriture féminine*, phallogocentric, language, laughter

In a world of the twenty-first century, where objectification of women's bodies and men's participation in it are normalized through the "men will be men" tagline in commercial advertisements like that of the whisky brand, Imperial Blue, Manto's stories about prostitutes and their claim of a fair share in the structure of language will never be old. The seemingly innocuous tagline is often taken by many women in the advertising field as "a justification, for bad, at times overtly sexist behaviour" (Sharma). Manto's sincerity as a progressive writer who is into reporting the real story of how men objectified women in his time mocks that sort of tagline and rips through "society's garments and unveil(s) deceit and hypocrisy" as his friend, Abu Saeed Qureshi writes about him (123). As a writer, he has always been sympathetic to the prostitutes of his city. In a lecture at a college in 1944, he said, "My heroine is the cheapest of whores ... whose heavy eyelids are weighed down by years of missed sleep. That's what I write about. *Her* desperation, *her* illness, *her* anxieties, *her* insults— ... that's what I write about, not the housewife's pleasant banter, good health, and high-mindedness" ("Lecture" 264). This shows that Manto's choice of characters does not portray women the way men want to see them, but rather women whom men do not



count as ideal. This paper takes “The Insult” as an example of that. Here the protagonist, Saugandhi, is a prostitute who has been working in Mumbai for the past five years. Initially, she is shown as a clever and confident prostitute who knows her way with her customers. She is also portrayed as a naïve woman in her relationship with Madho (a customer/boyfriend) who extorts money from her with false promises of a family life. Manto’s portrayal of Saugandhi’s emergence from this situation and his narrative both advocate for women’s rights. His portrayal of a prostitute can be read through Hélène Cixous’ poststructuralist feminist theory expounded in her essays, “The Laugh of the Medusa” and “Castration or Decapitation?” Manto, a member of the Urdu Progressive Writers’ Association, has often been subjected to accusations of obscenity. However, what seemed obscene to the court at that time (and to many of his fellow progressive writers) offers more scopes to read Manto as a writer whose works show traits of poststructuralist feminism even before such ideas were made popular in Feminist Studies in the Western world.

Hélène Cixous expresses her poststructuralist feminist ideas in her essays as a response to the Lacanian psychoanalytic theory of the Symbolic Order and the position it has given to women in it. In Lacanian definition, the Symbolic Order (the structure of language) is entirely patriarchal as it calls the center of the structure the Phallus. It is not the penis, but rather “the patriarchal order of the culture” as Mary Klages puts it (86). So, the Phallus is a patriarchal synonym of the Law-of-the-father/the Name-of-the-Father in Lacan’s theory which is analogous to the Freudian castration anxiety (84). Mary Klages, in further analysis, says, “The Phallus, as center, limits the play of elements and gives stability to the whole structure. . . . The Phallus stops play, so that signifiers can be connected firmly to signifieds” (84). Also, in Lacanian discourse, a boy and a girl enter the structure of language in different ways based on their genders. Since the boy identifies himself with the Phallus because of the presence of his penis, he is posited somewhere nearer the Phallus (nearer the center, hence nearer the power as an agent capable of speaking), and since the girl “lacks” the penis (the presence), she is posited further away from the Phallus (away from the center, hence away from the power as an agent incapable of speaking). Poststructuralist feminists argue that gender is a social construct intertwined with the concept of power, and thus the theory of different ways for boys and girls entering the structure of language is problematic in itself. According to the poststructuralist theorists, “gender is a set of signifiers attached to sexually dimorphic bodies, and that these signifiers work to divide social practices and relations into the binary oppositions of male/female and masculine/feminine” (Klages 91-92). In poststructuralist feminism, such a social construct, based on the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified, is prone to be deconstructed (92). Hélène Cixous in her 1975 essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” (“*Le Rire de la Méduse*,” translated in 1976) and in her 1976 essay “Castration or Decapitation?” (“*Le Sexe ou la tête?*” translated in 1981) proposes a theory that supports such possibility. She calls the patriarchal structure of language a phallogocentric system (something that is simultaneously phallogocentric and logocentric) and coins the expression *écriture féminine* (feminine writing) as a weapon to deconstruct that system. Cixous writes, “Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, . . . Woman must put herself into the text—as into the

world and into history—by her own move” (“The Laugh” 875). Her statement underlines the idea that a woman must write about her true feelings (*jouissance*, as she puts it) which only she understands as a living body so that the phallogocentric language that constitutes the binary oppositions in society can be broken and destroyed. She argues that writing has been governed “by a libidinal and cultural—hence political, typically masculine—economy;” that “this is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over, more or less consciously” in a manner in which “woman has never *her* turn to speak;” hence “writing is precisely *the very possibility of change*, ... the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures” (879). She also mentions “male writing” that women can produce by writing “the classic representations of women (as sensitive—intuitive—dreamy, etc.)” (878). Though, in this argument, Cixous emphasizes on women writing about themselves and on reducing the phallogocentric representations of women by women writers, she does not ignore the possibility of male writers writing for women and representing them as beings capable of *speaking*. She also proposes an “*other bisexuality*” based on the “non-exclusion either of the difference or of one sex” (884). Mary Klages considers this “*other bisexuality*” as something which “rather than taping masculine and feminine together, ... would dissolve the distinctions, so that sexuality would be from any body, any body part, at any time” (104). Such scope of transcending a socially constructed gender-based authorship of male writers and female writers supports the gender-neutral authorship where a male writer or a female writer is just a writer. From this perspective, Manto's stories contribute to the *écriture féminine* in the Urdu narratives.

Along with the concept of *écriture féminine*, this paper takes another idea of Cixous—laughter as a mode of speech for women—to analyze Manto's “The Insult.” Cixous shows that since women are kept at a distance from authority (the Phallus), their position is capable of escaping that system more freely than men who stay closer to the Phallus and thus, remain more confined and shackled in meaning with the signifiers. Mary Klages explains Cixous' idea in this manner: because of such a position, women “have more freedom to behave as they choose, rather than as the center dictates” (100). Hence, women are capable of producing a “more fluid, more flowing, more flexible” language (100). So, a flexible language, free from meaning and stability contains its lucidity in a simple expression like laughter. Cixous characterizes language as being able “to break up the ‘truth’ with laughter” (“The Laugh” 888). The Medusa myth becomes more appropriate with this connection between language and laughter. Medusa, a classic case of victim blaming, is used as a strong metaphor in Cixous' theory to highlight the non-speaking position of women in the phallogocentric structure of language. However, Medusa is also shown by her as a mythical figure capable of laughing away that phallogocentric structure when her gaze turns men, not women, into stone. Cixous tells women, “You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing” (885). In her essay “Castration or Decapitation?” Cixous draws a Chinese anecdote from Sun Tse who, in his manual of strategy, devises a way to teach the inattentive queens a lesson for always laughing during his training sessions (42). The punishment set for them is to be decapitated—too heavy a punishment for too light a “crime”. Cixous points out that while a man, from the

psychoanalytic perspective, bears the fear of castration, a woman is expected to bear the fear of decapitation to keep her fixed in meaning in the phallogocentric order. She writes, “It’s a question of submitting feminine disorder, its laughter, ... to the threat of decapitation. If man operates under the threat of castration, if masculinity is culturally ordered by the castration complex, it might be said that the backlash, the return, on women of this castration anxiety is its displacement as decapitation, execution, of woman, as loss of her head” (“Castration” 43). So, the discrimination lies in the system –when men fear losing just a genital organ, women fear losing their life, their very existence. Cixous’ reference to this story accentuates the passivity woman is defined with in the phallogocentric structure of language. So, she ends her essay with this proposition of laughter to be the language of woman, “Laughter that breaks out, overflows, a humor no one would expect to find in women—which is nonetheless surely their greatest strength because it’s a humor that sees man much further away than he has ever been seen” (55).

Considering these ideas of *écriture féminine* and laughter as language, “The Insult” can be read as a text (or *sext*, according to Cixous) that establishes its protagonist, Saugandhi as a woman who starts speaking with her laughter and shakes the phallogocentric order that Madho has been holding her into as a passive, non-speaking being. Gail Minault classifies the Urdu-speaking womanhood in the early twentieth century with a daring linguistic identity while defining the concept of the “earthy, graphic, and colorful” *begamati zuban* (women’s Urdu), in which “women are not worried about whether the men think them ‘ladylike’ or not, since men are not party to the conversation” (119). Though men of that time, as also seen in Manto’s story, hold women in passivity and silence, women do hold, in their own linguistic sisterhood, a potential power of disregarding men from the socio-cultural perspective as is made clear in Minault’s point of view. This resonates with what Vanda Zajko and Miriam Leonard opine, “Cixous makes it clear that her project involves more than a defiant rejection of the existing order. It is also a profoundly creative political engagement with the way things could have been” (3). To contextualize this line of discussion, it can be said that Manto addresses the potential power of speech in a character like Saugandhi and writes a criticism of his time. Also, the very portrayal brings out the sexuality of Saugandhi that contributes to the *écriture féminine* in the tradition of Urdu fiction.

The story begins with a tired Saugandhi falling asleep in her bed after attending to one of her regular customers, “the official from the city’s Sanitation Department” (“The Insult” 46). She calls this customer Boss and this sets the tone of passivity in her character. Her lying in bed calls to mind Cixous’ statement in reference to the story of Sleeping Beauty in her 1975 essay with Catherine Clément “*La Jeune Née*,” of how women characters have “a strong chance of always being found in one position: in bed. In bed and asleep ...” (“Castration” 43). This association might make the beginning of Manto’s story look like another phallogocentric depiction of woman. However, Manto, famous among his contemporaries for his irony and twist in language, clears that confusion with the last line of the paragraph: “He [the customer] could have stayed the night, but he professed great concern for his lawfully wedded wife who loved him very much” (“The Insult” 46).

The ironic combination of the official of the Sanitation Department and the disloyal husband in the same man highlights the germophobic tendency that Manto's society holds toward prostitutes. Also, this line introduces the reader to what Khalid Hasan, in the introduction of his translation of Manto's works, calls the "bite and sharpness" of Manto's narrative technique (xii). Manto's witty style of breaking the traditional ways of portraying prostitutes in negative roles points to the poststructuralist trait in his writing. This further establishes him as a writer who shows gender-neutral authorship that has already been mentioned earlier in the paper.

Manto's description of Saugandhi's room spells out the phallogocentric language that Cixous says can be deconstructed through *écriture féminine*. Her room can be taken as a concrete existence of the Symbolic Order. To begin with, there are "four picture frames hung on the wall" and "each held a man's photo" ("The Insult" 47). They are all Saugandhi's customers whom she adores and desires to be loved by. These four picture frames can be taken as the position of men in the phallogocentric Symbolic Order; their being fixed in photo frames symbolize men being fixed in stable meaning in the structure of language. There is also "a brightly coloured picture of Ganesha" adorned with "both fresh and withered flowers" in the room "at a short distance from the photos ... in the corner on the left" (47). This photograph of Lord Ganesha, a male god in Hindu mythology who is worshipped for wisdom and knowledge, can be taken as the center or the Phallus in this context—the photographs of the four men are closer to it, thus reflecting upon its being a representation of the Phallus, the center, with all its godly attributions of holding the wisdom of the universe. Manto's description extends this symbolism further with the small lamp in front of the deity with "its flame standing erect like a flick of paint on a devotee's forehead" (47). Also, the deity's photograph being "on the left" is a reminder of what Toril Moi refers to as the "patriarchal binary thought" presented in Cixous' works in which man is always on the left side of the slash (102). In Mary Klages' opinion, Cixous' criticism of the phallogocentric structure of language is "based on the primacy of the terms on the left-hand side of the slash in any array of binary opposites" (98). Though the picture of Lord Ganesha is "in the corner on the left," its importance as the center of attraction in Saugandhi's room, with the extents of worship through flower, oil lamp, incense sticks, etc., cannot be ignored ("The Insult" 47). In this discussion, it is interesting to note that the four photographs are hung on the wall; that means they can anytime be taken down, thus denoting the possibility of restructuring the apparently stable position of men in the structure of language. It is also interesting to note that Saugandhi herself has framed and placed the photographs on the wall; she herself has placed the picture of Lord Ganesha in the niche and regularly worships it. This points to her desire to be loved and approved by a man. In her conversations with other prostitutes, she shares all her tactics of handling the customers (49-50); yet Manto expresses her naivety in these words: "she knew countless ways to keep her johns in their place. While she had resolved many times not to accept their vulgar demands and to treat them indifferently, she would always get caught up in the moment and give in. She couldn't control her desire to be loved" (51). The effect of a phallogocentric system is so intense that women often think like men that they are incapable of speaking for themselves

and they need to be protected by men. Cixous underlines this nature in women and says,

For as soon as we exist, we are born into language and language speaks (to) us, dictates its law, ...: it lays down its familial model, lays down its conjugal model, and even at the moment of uttering a sentence, admitting a notion of “being,” ... we are already seized by a certain kind of masculine desire, the desire that mobilizes philosophical discourse. (“Castration” 45)

In Cixous’ terms, a woman is born into this phallogocentric system. It is not the woman who speaks the language of the system, rather the language, being phallogocentric in nature, speaks to the woman and defines her. The “masculine desire” in Saugandhi’s case is to be loved and rescued by a man with whom she can have a family. Here comes Madho as an agent of this phallogocentric system with all his false prospects of fulfilling Saugandhi’s desire as the Prince Charming in her life.

Madho speaks the phallogocentric language. He is a head constable in Pune (interestingly a man who is to enforce the law) and Saugandhi has a relationship with him that, according to her pimp, Ram Lal, is “a strange affair” (“The Insult” 48). He visits Saugandhi whenever he is in need of money; he comes, has sex with her, talks her into giving him ten or fifteen rupees, and leaves; it is like a routine that Saugandhi is used to. Saugandhi does realize that Madho is extorting money from her, but she cannot give it up as she needs to be loved. It is also true with her other customers as Manto writes, “It seemed like every night some john would proclaim his love to her. Saugandhi knew they were lying, and yet her emotions would overwhelm her and she would imagine they really did” (51). She has offered her love to all four men in the four photographs in her room, Madho being one of them. So, she has four men as her Prince Charming, none of whom really loves her back. The Prince Charming factor is important here to understand Saugandhi’s position as a passive existence in the phallogocentric structure of language. One of the prominent French Feminists and predecessors of Cixous, Simone de Beauvoir, states that the waiting for the Prince Charming episode starts in a girl’s adolescent period as “she has always been convinced of male superiority; this male prestige is not a childish mirage; it has economic and social foundations” (352). Saugandhi, coming from a society in which “the ideal Indian womanhood” is designed in the frames of the mythological figures like Sita and Savitri, as R. K. Gupta puts it in his essay, “Feminism and Modern Indian Literature,” might have had the same dream since her childhood (179). Cixous, too, brings in the point of Prince Charming in her discussion of how psychoanalysis has defined women (“Castration” 46). Since psychoanalysis focuses on a woman’s lack of penis, in Cixous’ satiric interpretation of it she says, “without man she (woman) would be indefinite, indefinable, nonsexed, unable to recognize herself: outside the Symbolic. But fortunately, there is man: he who comes ... Prince Charming. And it’s man who teaches woman ... who teaches her to be aware of lack, to be aware of absence, aware of death” (46). So, Saugandhi’s search for Prince Charming in Madho and her other customers is not only emotionally caused but also socially constructed. In Manto’s depiction of the beginning of Saugandhi and Madho’s relationship, he shows Madho in the position of a man “who teaches woman.” In their first

meeting, Madho gives her a long lecture which contains high-sounding utopian statements of a lover,

You don't feel ashamed? Do you know what you are selling me? ... *Chi, chi, chi*. ... For seven and a half rupees you promise to give me something you can't give, and I've come for something I can't just take. I want a woman, but do you want a man? ... What's our relationship? It's nothing, nothing at all. ... You're eyeing it, and I'm eyeing it. Your heart says something, and my heart says something. Why shouldn't we make something together? ... Stop doing this. I'll buy everything for you. What's this room's rent? ("The Insult" 52-53)

Madho's imperatives and interrogatives strengthen his position as a dictating agent of the phallogocentric structure of language which defines Saugandhi as a woman incapable of speech. Though Saugandhi and Madho have talked for three hours after his tirade, she cannot be taken as a woman who can speak, according to Cixous' idea of speech. Cixous makes a distinction between talking and speaking from the psychoanalytic viewpoints of Freud and Lacan, "It is said, in philosophical texts, that women's weapon is the word, because they talk, talk endlessly, chatter, ... but they don't actually *speak*, they have nothing to say" ("Castration" 49). The very word "nothing," which is also found in Madho's lecture to Saugandhi, is associated with the "nothingness" that both Freud and Lacan have associated with woman in their theories. Cixous reads Freud's question regarding woman "What does she want?" as "What could she want, she who wants nothing?" or "Without me, what could she want?" (45). So, to *speak*, in Cixous' terms, would be to shatter the very idea of nothingness. Madho, too, poses such questions to Saugandhi in his apparent wooing. Yet his words leave "a strong effect" on Saugandhi ("The Insult" 53). He also tidies her room, complains about the unhygienic conditions, and shows great concern for her health (53). Such attention from a man who promises love and domestic bliss compels Saugandhi to form a relationship with him in which both of them are aware of each other's lies—Saugandhi's continuation of her profession and Madho's exploitation of her money. This means she is ready to be in a "strange affair" if it gives her the patriarchal approval of a domestic life and proves Madho to be her Prince Charming.

Drawing on the Lacanian statement of a woman's inability to speak of her pleasure, Cixous shows how psychoanalysis has equated being unable to speak of pleasure with not having any pleasure ("Castration" 45). Hence, Cixous' entire concept of *écriture féminine* stands on writing about female *jouissance* or female pleasure. Manto's portrayal of Saugandhi includes a depiction of her sexuality and how she enjoys it. Not only does she adore her firm breasts and round thighs but she also likes her profession because "her body liked it very much" ("The Insult" 50). Manto's depiction of Saugandhi's feelings about her sexuality and her mind shows the poststructuralist approach to writing about female *jouissance*. While describing how she dreams of the delightful fatigue after having sex, Manto writes, "That type of unconsciousness that wraps around you after being utterly wrung dry of your last ounce of energy—what pleasure!" (50). The fluidity of woman's position near the margin of the Symbolic Order becomes evident in Manto's use of the bird images in the

portrayal of Saugandhi – first, when she is sleeping in her bed with her shoulders “spread out like a kite’s bow”; and second, when she feels like “floating high in the sky with the wind encompassing her” (46, 50). However, there are also images of birds that cannot fly – the caged parrot in her room and her armpit’s skin looking like that of “a plucked hen” – denoting her inability to speak in the phallogocentric structure of language (46).

The incident that insults and transforms Saugandhi from a non-speaking being to a speaking one happens the night a customer rejects her with disgust right after looking at her. Saugandhi, rising from her sleep with a bad headache, puts on her flowery sari and goes outside with Ram Lal near the car where the customer is waiting. Pointing a sharp flashlight at her, the customer takes one look at her face and utters the word “Yuhkk!” (“The Insult” 57). Before Saugandhi realizes what is happening, the car drives off. Leslie A. Flemming identifies Manto’s best stories to have “the sharp focus on the single illuminating experience” of the protagonists (95). Here, the sharp flashlight on Saugandhi’s face followed by the rejection with “Yuhkk!” serves that purpose. The “Yuhkk!” shakes her up from her apparently content life and brings her to the crossroads of retrospection where she questions herself endlessly: “What had just happened? ... So that ‘yuhkk’ meant he didn’t like me?” (“The Insult” 57). Saugandhi, though being spoken to in the phallogocentric language in the story so far, finds herself at a loss to determine the meaning of “yuhkk”—Dislike? Disgust? Disapproval? Rejection? Or something else? With such confusion, she has an emotional breakdown in the street in the middle of the night where all that she keeps on hearing is “yuhkk” and the expression starts “messing with her heart” (58). Being insulted thus, she wants her internal pain to “engulf her body” so that it becomes impossible for her to think (58). Saugandhi, whose name means fragrance, feels that the “yuhkk” identifies her with something filthy, rejects her as someone worth liking, reduces her from a woman to an object, and puts question marks on the photographs of the four men in her room. She earnestly wishes to redo the scene so that she can take revenge on that man and his “yuhkk.” Priyamvada Gopal explains this realization of Saugandhi as a beginning “to comprehend the distinction between objecthood and subjectivity” (99). This statement is established more in the narrative thus: “She felt as though someone was pressing his thumb against her ribs, as you press your thumb into a sheep or goat to see if there is any meat beneath the hair” (“The Insult” 62). The money she earns in this profession “melting right into her blood” makes the very mettle of her existence and has already introduced her as someone who is into her profession (46). When she feels like screaming to that customer, “Here, take it for free—take it. But not even your father could buy what I’ve inside me!” (62), it becomes clear that this rejection has not only insulted her as a prostitute but also as someone with an inner value for herself.

What Saugandhi has inside her comes out in the episode of her laughter becoming her language. When Saugandhi manages to come back home, she finds Madho waiting for her. Madho tells her, “Today you took what I said to heart—a walk in the morning is very good for your health!” (“The Insult” 63). Right after the episode of rejection, this welcome sounds ironically phallogocentric at this point of the story with all its didactic approach. Smelling liquor on her, he thinks this to be the right moment to extort some



money from her to escape the police report filed against him. The amount of the money, which he says he needs to bribe the sub-inspector with, increases from twenty to fifty and finally to a hundred as he goes on talking about it. What Madho has not realized is that this night Saugandhi has woken up from her sleep and has decided to respond. Cixous' idea of laughter as discussed in the paper earlier is reflected here. With the "Yuhkk" in mind, Saugandhi has decided that the rejection by a man will not be able to make her reach the point of self-rejection. She gets up from the bed, approaches the photographs on the wall, and, to Madho's surprise, bursts into laughter. One by one she rips them all off the wall and throws them outside the window in a fit of rage accompanied by laughter. Manto writes, "Saugandhi started cackling, a sharp laugh that pricked Madho like needles. ... Saugandhi erupted in bitter laughter. It rained from her lips like embers flying from a grindstone. ... Saugandhi laughed loudly and then shouted, 'Yuhkk!'" (65-66). The "rusty needles" in her room become active like her in Manto's depiction of Saugandhi's laughter (47). Also, the "embers flying from a grindstone" associate her image with the raging image of the avenging Medusa turning men into stones. In reference to the myth of Medusa, Gillian M. E. Alban says that she "creates, through her reflected gaze, a symbiosis between viewing subject and viewed object" (164). In this context, the symbiotic relationship between Saugandhi and Madho dislocates the latter's position as the subject as a result of which he can only force "himself to laugh" every time Saugandhi starts laughing ("The Insult" 65-66). As Veena Das points out, "it is the transactions between language and body, especially in the gendered division of labor, by which the antiphony of language and silence recreates the world in the face of tragic loss" (68). Both Saugandhi's physical and verbal rage here initiate an antiphony of her language (her laughter) and Madho's silence that can recreate the entire world of her psyche from Cixous' perspective of poststructuralist feminism. Her laughter, together with the shattering sound of the glass frames of the photographs, marks the beginning of the breaking point of the phallogocentric structure of language in which Saugandhi has been confined with the signifiers that denote passivity, silence, and even the "Yuhkk!" Her ability to speak has been smothered by these meanings the way the gramophone, a machine that can produce sound if operated, in her room is covered with "a tattered black cloth" (47). She starts speaking in her laughter and speaking with her laughter; it is a new language which is free of the oppressing signifiers. On Madho's warning about this language that terrifies him, Saugandhi repeats the entire lecture given by Madho in their first meeting with all its do's and don'ts—only this time the speaker is Saugandhi herself. Madho has barely uttered her name and she begins,

No—fuck off with your "Saugandhi this and Saugandhi that"! Does your mother live here that she's going to give you fifty rupees? Or are you some young, handsome stud I've fallen in love with? You son of a bitch! Are you trying to impress me? Am I at your beck and call? You fucking bum, who do you think you are? I'm asking you, "Who the hell are you?" (67)

These rhetorical questions are shot at Madho in the parentheses of Saugandhi's laughter. Madho's identity has been put into question and he, too, has been reduced to the point of

being nothing in Saugandhi's laughter-language which eventually decentralizes him from the stable position in the phallogocentric system.

Though the history of women's writing in the Indian subcontinent dates back to 600 BC in the earliest songs of the nuns written in Pali, it has been buried in the censorship of literary history as mentioned by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita in the preface to *Women Writing in India* (Volume I) (xviii). There can be found a thin line of the legacy of *écriture féminine* in other Indian languages but not any significant ones written in Urdu directly addressing female sexuality through prostitutes before the Progressive Writers' Association. So, Manto's stories, like "The Insult" and others, contribute not only to developing that *écriture féminine* in the Urdu language but also to maintaining a legacy of such writing which finds an expression in a recent Bollywood movie, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022), directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali. There are other Bollywood movies with prostitutes as lead characters but this one portrays the real story of a prostitute named Gangubai, who worked in the Kamathipura red-light area in Manto's Bombay. Gangubai had risen in power in her time and advocated for prostitutes' rights to education and to the legitimization of their profession. In a scene in the movie, Gangubai (played by Alia Bhatt) introduces herself as a prostitute to a journalist, Amit Faizi (played by Jim Sarbh), saying, "Me prostitute, Gangubai" (*Gangubai Kathiawadi* 1:53:41-1:53:55). The demand of respect and legitimacy of her profession that Gangubai advocated in real life and in her portrayal in this movie echoes Saugandhi's self-esteem as a woman in her profession. This finds expression not only on screen but also on stage. In their discussion on Usha Ganguly's play, *Naamgottroheen—Manto's Meyera*, an adaptation of Manto's stories about prostitutes ("Black Salwar," "The License," and "The Insult"), Nadia Rahman and Tahmina Zaman strike a similar chord as they state, "the scriptwriter wished to focus on the taboo profession (prostitution) as an everyday affair rather than a stigmatized one" (167). In Manto's observation, too, such a message is delivered as he considers prostitutes as "the products of the society," hence as "a legitimate part" of his culture ("Virtuous Women" 155). That boldness in Manto's approach makes his stories of prostitutes have a vital representation of female sexuality in the *écriture féminine* of the Urdu literary subculture. Despite such representation, women rising to power and speaking their own language are still criticized and frowned upon by men no matter which scenario they are in. One example of that would be the 2016 US presidential election campaign during which the Democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton, had been compared to Medusa by conservative male writers and right-winged bloggers (Johnston). So, as far as the Medusa myth and Cixous are concerned, these ideas of women speaking their own language to deconstruct the phallogocentric system are not old yet as long as in such a system, women, be she a prostitute or a US presidential candidate, are held back in passivity and silence.

Thus, Manto's approach is not merely to write about women but rather to write for women. Through Saugandhi in "The Insult," he puts the spotlight on such an area in his city that both makes and fakes the reality of women in the profession of prostitution. In the phallogocentric structure of the language of the story, Saugandhi is held back to the traditional passive and silent position of women though she is a working woman, earning

her own money with her own labor. However, when she feels insulted to the core of her heart, she turns back and makes her ground clear: she is quite capable of speaking her mind rather than just being silent. Her hysteric laughter becomes her language and decentralizes Madho from his position of action and speech. She laughs and she speaks for herself, and that laughter reverberates through the readers of Manto's *écriture féminine* across time.

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