

SA‘ADAT HASAN MANTO

I Too Have Something To Say*

IN 1942, my short story “Kālī Shalvār” (Black Shalwar) appeared in the special annual number of the monthly literary magazine *Adab-e Laṭīf* (Lahore). Some people consider it obscene. I’m writing this article to disabuse them of their mistaken notion.

Writing short stories is my profession. I know all the ins and outs of this art. I have written many others on this subject before the story in question. None of them are smutty, nor will the many more which I will write on this subject in the future be so.

Storytelling goes all the way back to the fall of Adam, and will continue, I believe, till doomsday, though it will go through many incarnations. However, man will persist in communicating his feelings to the ears of other men. A lot has already been written about prostitutes; a lot more will be written. What exists before the eye will always provoke discussion and writing. Prostitutes are not a recent phenomenon; they have existed in our midst for thousands of years. They figure even in sacred books. Now that there is no longer any room for a fresh heavenly book or a new prophet, you won’t read about them in the sacred lines of revelations, but rather in newspapers, magazines, or books, which you can pore over unencumbered by the need to surround yourself in the spiraling haze of aloes-wood and frankincense smoke and, when finished reading, toss them in the trash bin.

Well, I’m someone who writes in such magazines and books. I write because I feel I have something to say. I share with others the way I see things, and the angle from which I see them. If writers are lunatics, please consider me a lunatic as well.

The backdrop of “Kālī Shalvār” is a prostitute’s lodging. It isn’t as astonishing as the nest of a weaverbird, about which we hear all kinds of wonderful things. In Delhi, they have set up an area exclusively for such women and built numberless residential units to house them. My Sulṭāna

*“Mujhē Bḥī Kuṅh Kahnā Hai,” from the author’s collection *Manṭōnumā* (Lahore: Saṅg-e Mīl Publications, 1991), 732–42.

also lives in one such unit. She hasn't constructed it herself like the weaverbird, nor does she catch fireflies to light it in the evening like that bird. For light, there was electricity, and since she couldn't get that for free, any more than the unit in which she lived, she had to work. Had she been married, all this would have come to her free. But she wasn't married and she was a woman. When a woman is obliged to pay for lodgings and electricity and is saddled with a good-for-nothing layabout like Khudā Bakhsh, who trusts in God and runs after fakirs and holy men, it's obvious that she can't be the kind of woman we see in our respectable homes.

My Sultāna is a bordello woman. Her profession is precisely what women do in bordellos. Who doesn't know these women? Nearly every city and town has its red-light district. Who isn't aware of running gutters, nearly every city and town has them, and they're there to carry away the filth.

If we can talk about our marbled bathrooms, about soaps and laven- ders, why can't we talk about these drains and gutters that carry away the filth of our bodies? If we can talk about temples and mosques, why not about whorehouses visited by some people on their way back from those temples and mosques? If we can talk about opium, bhang, charas, and wine contracts, why not about brothels where this stuff is used liberally?

We treat *bhaṅgīs* (sweepers) as untouchable. Whenever one of them goes out carrying the basket of our filth, we instantly cover our noses with handkerchiefs. Surely we find it all revolting, but just as surely we can't deny their existence, any more than we can deny the feces we discharge daily from our bowels. Medications for treating constipation and diarrhea exist because it is necessary to purge noxious matter from our bodies. New ways to flush out the filth are thought up continually because it piles up daily. If by some miracle our bodies could be transformed and its functions undergo a radical change, we wouldn't be caught dead talking about constipation and diarrhea. Likewise, if some mechanical methods could be invented to dispose of our filth, sweepers would go out of business.

If the talk is about sweepers, garbage and filth will inevitably figure in it. Just as inevitably, what prostitutes do will figure in when we talk about them.

We don't visit a prostitute's chamber to offer ritual prayer or shower blessings upon the Prophet. Why, we go there ... well, it's obvious. We go there because we can, and buy freely and without objection what we've come for. Now, when we're allowed to go there without restriction, when any woman can decide to become a prostitute of her own free will, get a license and start selling her body, when such a transaction is sanctioned by law, why can't we talk about her?

If talking about her is obscene, her existence is no less obscene. If it is forbidden, her business too should be forbidden. Remove the prostitute and we'll cease talking about her without any prompting.

We can talk openly about lawyers, barbers, laundrymen, innkeepers, and *kunjars*; relate stories about thieves, shoplifters, thugs and highway-men; fabricate tall tales about fairies and genies; make such preposterous claims as that the entire planet Earth is balanced on the two horns of a bull; author *Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamza* and the tale of *Ṭōṭa-Mainā*; praise the mace of Landhūr the wrestler; talk about 'Amr the Trickster's magical cap and bag; and recite stories of parrots and mynahs who could speak in any language. We can talk about wizards and their incantations and how to neutralize the effects of their spells, and whatever our fancy demands about spells cast by spirits, and about the practice of alchemy. We can quarrel about the length of beards and trousers and hair. We can think up new recipes for cooking *raughan jōsh*, pilaf, and *qorma* and wonder about what kind and color of buttons would go well with a green fabric. So why can't we think about prostitutes and talk about their profession or comment about their clients?

We can make a girl and boy fall in love and set up their first rendezvous at the tomb-sanctuary of Dātā Gañj-bakhsh and drag along an old hag as their go-between so the two restless souls can meet often. We can squash their romance in the end or make them take poison and arrange that their coffins be borne out from their respective neighborhoods at the same time, have the lovers buried by some miracle in adjoining graves, and, if need be, arrange for angels to shower flowers over them ...

Why can't we talk about the life of a prostitute, who needs no angels or flowers? When she dies no one from neighborhoods other than her own joins the funeral procession and no grave ever wants to be next to hers. Her existence itself is a coffin which society is carrying aloft on its shoulders. Unless she is interred for good, there will be talk about her.

Even if this corpse is in a state of decomposition, is stinking, is grotesque and revolting, what is so wrong in seeing its face? Does she have no connection to us? Is she not one of our own? We will remove the shroud from her face now and then to look at it and show it to others.

That's precisely what I've done in my "Kālī Shalvār": shown the face of just such a corpse. Have a look.

A warehouse stretched from one corner to the other on that side of the street. To the right, huge bales and piles of different goods lay under a metal roof. To the left was an open space with innumerable intersecting railway tracks. Whenever the iron tracks flashed in the sun, Sultana's eyes fell on her hands where the protruding blue veins looked very much like those

tracks. Engines and carriages were moving all the time in the open space, this way and that, constantly creating a veritable din with their chug-chug and clatter. On the days when Sultana got up early in the morning and went out to the balcony, a strange sight greeted her: thick smoke spilling out from engines in the misty dawn and slowly rising up in the murky sky like plump, beefy men. Clouds of steam rose noisily from the tracks and quickly dissolved in the air. Now and then the sight of a shunted carriage left to run on its own along a track reminded her of herself: she too had been pushed to run on her own along the track of her life. Others simply changed the switches and she moved along—to God knows where; one day, when the momentum had slowly spent itself, she would come to a stop, at some place not known to her.

Could there be more revealing allusions/hints than these for an intelligent reader? Here I've made a successful attempt to present the true conditions of Sulṭāna's life. When Delhi municipal authorities were setting up a special, separate area for prostitutes they would not have imagined how tellingly the warehouse would come to represent Sulṭāna's life. The juxtaposition of those special housing units and the warehouse would provoke the sagacious to write several stories like "Kālī Shalvār."

I have pulled the shroud from over the corpse's face in yet another story. I begin my famous story "Hatak" (Insult) thus:

Drained from the day's grueling work, Saugandhi had fallen asleep almost as soon as she hit the bed. Minutes ago, dead drunk and after a prolonged session of stormy sex, which had left even her bones aching, the city's sanitary inspector—she called him "Seth"—had gone home to his wife. He would have stayed for the night at Saugandhi's but for the regard he had for his wife who loved him dearly.

The money she had received from the inspector for her services was still stuffed in her tight-fitting bra stained with the man's drool. Now and then the silver coins clanked a bit with the rise and fall of her breathing, the clank blending with the irregular rhythm of her heart. It was as if the molten silver of the coins was dripping into her bloodstream. Her chest was on fire, partly from the half-bottle of brandy the inspector had brought along and partly from the raw, country liquor they had downed with water when the soda ran out.

She was lying face down on the large teak bed, her arms, bare to her shoulders, splayed out like the bow-shaped rib of a kite that has come loose from its dew-drenched paper. A swelling of puckered flesh was visible under her right arm. The skin there had acquired a bluish tint from frequent shaving and looked like a graft from the skin of a freshly plucked chicken.

This then is the portrait of Saugandhi, a sister of Sulṭāna. I end the story thus:

When the dog returned wagging his stumpy tail and sat at her feet flapping his ears, Saugandhi was startled. She felt a terrifying stillness around her, a stillness she had never experienced before. A strange emptiness engulfed everything, and she couldn't help thinking of a train standing all alone in its metal shed after disgorging every last one of its passengers. This feeling of emptiness which had suddenly arisen weighed heavily on her. She made repeated attempts to fill the consuming void but failed. She was trying to stuff her brain with countless thoughts all at once, but it was like a sieve. As fast as she filled it, everything filtered out.

She sat in the chair for the longest time. When she couldn't come up with anything to distract her mind even after a long and desperate search, she picked up her mangy dog, put him down beside her on the spacious teak bed, and went to sleep.

If you read "Kālī Shalvār" closely, you will conclude the following:

1. Sulṭāna is an ordinary prostitute. She ran her business at first in Ambala and later moved to Delhi at her lover Khudā Bakhsh's suggestion.
2. Khudā Bakhsh was a man who had put his trust in God and believed in the saintly graces (*karāmāt*) of fakirs.
3. Sulṭāna was consumed by despair when her business failed to pick up in Delhi. Her despair progressively grew worse when Khudā Bakhsh started chasing after fakirs and holy men.
4. Muḥarram was just around the corner. Sulṭāna's girlfriends had already got their black outfits made; Sulṭāna couldn't, because she had no money.
5. Just at that point Shañkar drops in from the blue. A footloose and fancy-free man, he too has nothing other than his sharp intelligence, quick wit, and eloquence. In exchange for these assets he demands from her the commodity she sells for a given price. Sulṭāna doesn't accept this deal.
6. The second time, it is not Shañkar who comes up to her, it is she who beckons him to come up, accepting him merely as a casual event in the stagnant waters of her life. She cheers up seeing him, but can't get the thought out of her mind that she doesn't have a black *shalvār* to commemorate Muḥarram. She tells him: "Muḥarram is coming and I don't have enough money for a black *shalvār*. You've already heard from me all about my woes. I've given my shirt and dupatta to be dyed just this morning."
7. On the first of Muḥarram Shañkar returns to her with a black *shalvār* ... Khudā Bakhsh's God and his belief in holy men don't help much. What does help is Shañkar's sharp intelligence. If this is the effect you get after reading the story, well then, it is not a story that offends one's sense of morality. If that is the case, it is certainly not a song that people might sing, and sing repeatedly, to titillate themselves. No gramophone company would put it on a record because it is bereft of stirring *dadras* and *thumrīs*.

8. Stories like “Kālī Shalvār” are not written for amusement. Reading them you don’t start drooling with a surfeit of sensual passion. I haven’t committed an immoral act by writing it. In fact, I’m proud that I wrote it, and thank God that I didn’t write a *mašnavī* with such lines as these in it:

Out of breath while scuffling
 Covering while taking liberties
 Your forcing your lips against mine
 Your pushing your tongue against mine
 Your taking me in your love’s embrace
 Your clinging to me in your passion
 Your calling out my name in moans
 Your gently swatting me with sagging hands
 Your faltering whispers while supine
 Your watching me with glazed eyes
 Your asking me to let you be in God’s name
 That you are tired and sleepy; to not shake you
 Your helpless body becoming languid all at once
 Then rising suddenly and your calling out, “Enough!”
 All desire is now spent.
 Like the day night’s dark has spent.
 Would your lust ever reach its climax?
 Or would it consume as well the night?
 There is nothing left in me of desire.
 And it is now morn, no longer is it night.
 Enough or I might now hit you,
 Or call out to someone to help
 When every limb has been knocked out of shape,
 Pray, why wouldn’t one scream.
 If you remained unbent still
 None would hold up with you in this game.
 (Extract from the *Mašnavī* of Mir Dard)¹

And also thanks that I haven’t written such blazing poetry as this to slake my thirst and inflame my starving sensual desires:

Keeping your lips pressed to mine
 But not letting your head rest on my arm
 Teasing me by lying on my chest
 And becoming cross when I speak of my desire
 The pleasures of your tongue in my mouth
 The manifest hint of your desire in your acts

¹Musharraf Ali Farooqi has especially translated this and the following extract.
 —Tr.

And when I wish for something more
 When I desire a greater intimacy
 You place your hand and furiously refuse
 My unfastening your trousers
 Your shaking off my hand with each advance
 Your pushing me back against the pillow
 Your kicking me languidly
 And refusing me each time with a new excuse
 Your pulling your hand away forcibly
 And biting me in frustration
 Your moving under me furiously
 And breaking free from my hold
 Your tearing up in such helplessness
 And calling out with suppressed anger,
 "Night and day you amuse yourself thus,
 In a play not to my liking,
 Never are you satisfied,
 Never do you call it quits."

(From *Kulliyāt-e Mōmin*, "Mašnavī 2")

If one writes about the sexual relationship between man and woman in the above manner, I would consider it opprobrious because every grown person knows that when a man and a woman get into bed for sex, they engage in some such animal exercises, although they are never so pretty as the poetry above makes them out to be. They have been just overlaid with poetry, screened behind it. This, of course, is the poet's mischief, which is censurable.

If these ghastly acrobatics were made into a film and shown on the screen, I'm sure all sensible people would turn their faces away in revulsion. The poetry above, however, presents a very misleading picture of those animal exercises.

I call such poetry "mental masturbation"—reproachable as much for the writer as for the reader. My "Kālī Shalvār" is blissfully free of any such reproach. Nowhere in it have I depicted the sexual act in titillating language. What kind of sexual pleasure could one expect from my Sulṭāna who used to hurl obscenities at her *gōrā* [white] customers in her own tongue and considered them "silly fools"? She was a businesswoman to the hilt, pure and simple. After all, when we go to a wine shop, we don't expect the man behind the counter to be 'Umar Khayyām or that he would have Ḥāfiẓ's entire poetic corpus at the tip of his tongue. Wine merchants sell wine, not the quatrains of 'Umar Khayyām and the poetry of Ḥāfiẓ Shīrāzī.

My Sulṭāna is a prostitute first, a woman second. Prostitute first because the most important thing for man during his life is his stomach. Shaṅkar says

to her, "Surely, you must do something?"

"I waste my time," she replies. She doesn't say I sell wheat, or deal in gold and silver. She knows what she does for a living. If you asked a typist, "What do you do?" the answer would be, "I type." Naturally. There isn't a whole lot of difference between my Sultāna and a typist. □

—*Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon*