

SA‘ADAT HASAN MANTO

Afterword*

*Farigh mujhē na jān ke mānind-e ṣubḥ mehr
Hai dāgh-e ‘ishq zīnat-e jaib-e kafan hanūz*

—GHALIB

I FEEL LIKE TALKING TO YOU, my readers, informally today, not in the stiff language of forewords or legalese. Actually, even things which reside in some deeper recess of a person’s mind and are meant for his exclusive use often find their way into my short stories, plays, and semi-fictional articles, but since they’re framed as fiction you take them for fiction.

I feel blue today, strangely weary. I had felt the same gloom and weariness of the spirit some four or four-and-a-half years ago when I said goodbye to Bombay, my second home. I was sorry to leave a place where I had spent the most arduous days of my life, a place that had found room for a tramp like me, a person spurned by his family. That place had whispered to me: look, you can be happy here whether you make two paisas a day or ten thousand rupees, but if you want to, you can also live here as the unhappiest man on earth. Whatever you do, rest assured no one here will run you down. There won’t be anyone to counsel you either. You’ll have to do all the difficult work yourself. As far as I’m concerned, it makes no difference whether you sleep on a sidewalk or in some gorgeous mansion, whether you stay or leave. I am where I am, and I plan to stay here.

Thanks to my twelve years in Bombay and what all I learned there, I’m now able to survive in Pakistan and wherever else I might end up next. I’m Bombay on wheels, alive and kicking. I will create a world of my own no matter where I go.

A feeling of dejection swept over me after leaving Bombay. I had friends there whose friendship I’m proud of. I was married there. My first child was born there, as was my second. I earned from as little as a few rupees to tens

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of thousands there, and spent them. I loved Bombay. I still do. For years I wasn't able to react to the cataclysmic upheavals following the partition of the country in any way other than the most rebellious. Later, I accepted this horrific reality, but I didn't allow hopelessness to come anywhere near me.

I plunged into the bloody sea that one human had created by spilling the blood of another and emerged with a few priceless pearls—pearls of the toil and shame man exerted in spilling the last drop of his brother's blood, of the tears some eyes had shed in their irritation at not being able to extinguish humanity entirely. I have presented these pearls in my book *Siyāb Hāshiyē* (Black Margins).

I'm a human, but one who violated humanity, who made extinction the inevitable fate of everyone, who sold human flesh like any other commodity in their shops with ever more garish displays. I'm the same human who rose to the station of prophets and the same human who stained his hands with their blood. I have all the vices and virtues that others have. But believe me, I was pained, greatly pained, when some of my contemporaries laughed at my effort. They called me a joker, a liar, eccentric, unreasonable and reactionary. A dear friend went so far as to accuse me of digging into the pockets of corpses and robbing them of their cigarettes, their rings, and other such items. This dear fellow even published an open letter to me, which he could just as easily have given to me in person. In it he openly spilled his guts against my *Black Margins*.

I'm a human. I lost my cool. I assembled a greater filth than his, filth that might have stuck to the faces of my so-called critics for a long time. But reason prevailed; I realized this would be a mistake. Yes, it is human nature to respond with a heavier stone when you've been hit by a rock. No doubt about it. But the greater part of wisdom is to keep your feelings under wraps. It is a sign of man's forbearance, his fortitude.

I was angry, not because X had misunderstood me, but because he had doubted my intention—motivated by nothing more than a desire to appear chic and using a criterion that only recognized everything red as pure gold. He had done this at the bidding of a bankrupt and hollow movement that was receiving its marching orders from outside the country.

I was angry at what had happened to these people. What kind of Progressives were these people who were heading straight down the reactionary path? Why did the "red" they so loved always hasten toward the dark and the macabre? What kind of love of the peasantry was this that impelled them to incite the farmer to demand his wages before he'd even shed one drop of sweat? Why were they so eager to arm themselves with capital while pretending to be fighting against capitalism, to hand over their cherished weapons of sickle and hammer to their opponents? What kind

of literary revolution were they planning by devising schemes to transform machines into ghazals and vice versa?

I was angry at their frequent manifestos, long-winded resolutions, and effusive statements—the substance of which came straight from the Russian Kremlin to the Bombay Khetwadi and then on to McLeod Road. Such and such Russian poet has said that... such and such Russian short story writer has stated... such and such Russian intellectual has... I was furious. Why don't they ever talk about the land whose air they breathe? If we can no longer produce our own intellectuals, can this state of barrenness be remedied by just spreading red seeds imported from the Soviet Union?

I was angry because no one deigned to listen to me. A confused state of *laissez-faire* took hold of the country following Partition. People weren't just hankering after evacuee property—residential houses and mills and what not—but also high positions. They didn't stop to think for a minute that after such a seismic upheaval the situation wasn't likely to remain the same as before. No one could predict with any degree of confidence whether the existing narrow trails would expand into spacious highways or vanish altogether. Nor could a clear idea of the difference between the rule of the Other and the rule of one's own be formed in the encroaching chaos. What kind of atmosphere would it be and how would thoughts and feelings be nurtured in it? What would the nature of the relationship of the individual and the community be with the Government? These questions required deep thought and much deliberation, not slavish adherence to foreign prescriptions and precepts. Lamentably, our so-called intellectuals acted very hastily. In their eagerness for leadership they ignored whatever talent they had and left it to rot unutilized.

Initially these progressive custodians of literature decided to prohibit writers of their group from working for or publishing in government publications. I opposed their proposition and reasoned with them, showing how such a decision was manifestly wrong—not just wrong but entirely ridiculous.

It was wrong because it betrayed the fear of the Progressive Writers' Association that their members lacked, or might lack, steadfastness. Then again, such a decision should have been made more appropriately by their opponents, which I also would have considered absurd because no government would choose to do something which ran counter to its own interest.

Our Government did resort to the same ridiculous absurdity, but a bit later, after the Progressives had already openly touted their resolution of noncooperation. The Government banned the inclusion of any Progressive thought in their publications and on national radio. Later on, the provisions

of the Amrat Dhara Act were invoked to put some Progressives in the slammer. Government, after all, is another name for foolishness. So I have no wish to comment on the series of stupid moves they undertook to silence the Progressives.

I feel sorry that Ahmad Nadim Qasimi and Zaheer Kashmiri, two of the most harmless souls, whose mental and physical constitutions are incapable of comprehending the true meaning of the word “conspiracy,” were imprisoned uselessly. One of them is fond of making “brothers,” the other “sisters.” It is mind-boggling how the Government managed to detect the odor of some subversive element in this innocent pastime.

Anyway, beside itself with anger, the Government thoughtlessly threw them into prison, handing them over to the barber who would surely disfigure them beyond recognition, so when they emerged from the slammer after some time no one could say what sort of creatures they were: bald from head to toe or hairy all over like a chimpanzee. Would they be called “ghazi” or “shahid”? Would they become leaders, or snake-oil peddlers pushing their concoctions with hype and brio to the crowds gathered around them? Would they give up writing poetry and fiction? Or drape their tentacles around literature like the old man of Sindbad’s voyages. I’m not mocking them at all. If I were sent to prison, I would have said the same, or perhaps worse, about myself because I’m much too sensitive.

Well, the Government and the band of Progressive writers both fell prey to their own sense of inferiority. I felt sorry about it and still do, though I felt sorrier for the Progressives. They had butted into the Government’s affairs completely without rhyme or reason. These amateur pharmacists were blending a mixture for head colds with portions of literature and politics according to a recipe supplied by the Kremlin, but they paid no attention to the patient’s temperament or pulse. Well, you know the result. Isn’t everyone talking about this stagnation in literature?

I feel terribly gloomy today about how the representative periodicals of the Progressives had to somersault every which way, along with their leaders; how they were obliged to scrape away every last word of their wise counsels, statements, and resolutions; and how they had to cook up fresh excuses and apologies to win back the cooperation of the same writers they had earlier blacklisted and condemned.

I feel very gloomy today seeing those who had firmly withheld their cooperation from the Government now revising their decision. Why didn’t they see that man’s struggle for a livelihood is central among the fairly expansive orbit of his earthly struggles? Surely our manly courage can scale up to the heights of the Almighty, and we can ensnare even Gabriel in the wastelands of our madness. However, there are times when the only

choice we have open to us is to sing the praises of some stupid nawab for the sake of our stomachs. Of course this is man's greatest tragedy, but this tragedy is another name for being human.

And now all my anger has turned into a gloom of the spirit. I feel very distraught with anguish and sadness. What I've seen and continue to see only deepens this feeling. I'm exhausted. My life today is rife with difficulties. Even after a grinding day of work, I'm barely able to earn enough for my daily needs. The painful thought that if I were to die suddenly there would be no one to look after my wife and my three little girls gnaws at my heart night and day. Call me whatever you like: a pornographer, terrorist, eccentric, comedian, or even a reactionary, but I'm also a husband and a father. If my wife or one of my daughters were to take ill and I was forced to go door to door begging in order to pay for their proper treatment, this would certainly make my hackles rise. And I also have friends who are in more strained circumstances than I am myself. It hurts me terribly if I can't help them when I'm most needed. Believe me, I'm anguished to see anyone's, or even my own, head lowered from need. How would I feel if the libraries and the radio opened their doors to my writing after my death, or if my short stories were given the same status the late Iqbal's poetry is being accorded now? Oh, that would put my very soul on edge and make it terribly restless. When I think about that restlessness, I feel infinitely more contented with the way I've been treated so far. May God save me from the termites that will gnaw at my desiccated bones in the grave!

I feel very low today hearing the know-it-all pundits around me declare that literature has stagnated, that it is in decline, that it is in suspension. This sort of talk is the Siamese twin of the absurd claim that Islam is in danger. Literature, like Islam, is a self-existent entity. Energy never declines, and is never swept away by stagnation or suspension. The atom's power preexisted its discovery and will continue to exist even after. Its disuse or misuse doesn't imply a decline in its power, or its being near death, or having already died.

Literature is as alive and exuberant today as it was before it was discovered. The question of its stagnation or suspension doesn't arise. It is our own stagnation and suspension that we foist upon it.

For the reasons for this crisis we should, rather, try looking not so much in literature as in our own minds. This is not a difficult thing to do. If we ourselves wander off the straight path of literature, we shouldn't say that the path has moved away from us.

Politics has its own place. It's not fair to use literature to get to it. Likewise, it is equally wrong to use the labyrinthine bylanes of politics to arrive at a literature worthy of its name.

No matter how much one touts the greatness of Soviet Russian literature, the fact is, it is plain hypocritical. It isn't literature—no it is not. It is something else. Just look at anything written by a contemporary Russian author.

Literature cannot be monopolized, now or ever. It cannot be made-to-order by handing out contracts. "Literature is stagnant" is a sham, just as "Islam is in danger" is a sham. It is nothing more than a slogan yelled from the top of the minaret until a few months ago by the very same people who proclaimed after Partition that it is the Progressive writers who have saved the honor of literature. The poor were dying but the Progressive writers revived them through a gift of their own blood. Why then, so soon after the incarceration of a handful of members has the life of literature been thrown into jeopardy? Isn't it amazing!

I'm very down-spirited today. I was accepted as a Progressive at first; then suddenly I was turned into a reactionary. Now again these muftis are thinking to anoint me a Progressive. And the Government, so fond of its counter-fatwas, considers me a diehard Progressive—a pinko, that is, a Communist. And now and then, in extreme irritation, it accuses me of writing smut and drags me to the court. On the other hand, the same Government openly advertises in its publications that Sa'adat Hasan Manto is a great short-story writer of our country and his pen remained active even during the recent cataclysmic period. My sad heart trembles at the thought that this whimsical Government would not refrain from pinning some medal on my shroud, which would be the greatest insult to my scarred love.

Since Partition I have presented to you the following books, in quick succession,. They will help you understand unequivocally the state of my mind:

1. *Talkh, Tursh, aur Shīrīn*
2. *Lazzat-e Saṅg*
3. *Siyāh Hāshiyē*
4. *Khālī Bōtlēn, Khālī Dībbē*
5. *Ṭhanḍā Gōsht*
6. *Namrūd kī Khudā'ī*
7. *Bādshāhat kā Khātima*

And now this, my latest collection. Only two short stories in it, "Yazīd" and "San 1919 kī Ēk Bāt," have been published earlier; the rest are entirely new. How long it took to be completed and published can easily be gauged from a perusal of the relevant dates. I had just started on "Mummy," the last story of the collection, when, on 16 October, the news of the assassination of Khan Liaquat Ali Khan, the Prime Minister of Pakistan, arrived and greatly

upset me. Soon thereafter my second daughter Jajia came down with a terrible case of typhoid. This also kept me agitated for several days, with the result that the completion of the work was delayed. □

—*Translated by Mubammad Umar Memon*