'Lowly' Women: As Manto Saw Them (A Tribute To Manto)

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[Sadat Hassan Manto was an eminent Urdu writer of the sub-Continent. He wrote short stories and through his unique style of writing, projected the pathetic social conditions of his times, which remain soul stirring, even today. The English translation of his short stories, which has appeared recently, has generated a new debate on the ideology and philosophy of Manto. This article provides an overall appraisal of his writings. Editor]

HAVING spent about four years in Mumbai, and after he got fed up with the city, the noted Urdu writer of the sub-continent, Sadat Hassan Manto shifted to Delhi some time in early 1941 when he got a job in the All India Radio (AIR). Here he was expected to write radio dramas for the Urdu Service of the AIR.

When Manto was asked about his qualification during his interview for the AIR job, he is *believed* to have said that he did have a thorough grasp on the life and manners of prostitutes. There is no evidence how much truth there was in the assertion that Manto gave such a reply — a number of stories were indeed ascribed to him after his death, as it happens with anyone who wins the status of a legend — though, a maverick that he was, this reply was certainly not improbable for a person like him, at least in some or other informal chatting session.

It is another thing that even without establishing the veracity of this particular piece of legend, some people have sought to make a mountain out of the mole. For example, they assert that great indeed were the people who still gave Manto a job in the AIR, despite the reply which he reportedly gave. And that no one would dare to take any such step today, etc, etc, etc. And, then, it is still another thing that Manto had to leave the AIR mainly

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because of these same "great" people.

And, then, still a further issue is that the "greats" who supposedly showed "great" courage to recruit him despite his embarrassing reply, showed in reality no courage to benefit the AIR or its Urdu Service from the 'qualification' which Manto had — for the AIR, during the eighteen odd months that he worked there, Manto wrote not a single drama based on the life of prostitutes, pimps and the like. Obviously, they never dared to ask Manto, or for that matter anybody else, to write any such drama for the official broadcasts.

I

OUR concern here is certainly not what the reply was which Manto gave during his interview and what considerations procured him the AIR job. There may well have been other factors, one being that the AIR was, like many other departments, facing a severe manpower crunch in those war days. But the fact remains that when he joined the AIR, he certainly had a thorough grasp on the life of the prostitutes, their tragedies and travails — something which his stories very amply, and sharply, reflect.

Compare the contents of the first two collections of his short stories. As we know, *Aatishpaare* (*Nuggets of Fire*) which appeared from Lahore in 1936 and that it was based on eight short stories. But the thing to note is that none of these stories was on the life of the prostitutes. It is very clear that he had by that time no idea of this dark region of our collective life.

But the situation was different when the second collection of his short stories appeared four years later, from the same city of Lahore in 1940. This collection was titled *Manto ke Afsane* (*Short Stories by Manto*), and it was based on twenty short stories, five of which were specifically devoted to the lives of prostitutes. While *Shaghal* (Hobby) bears the inscription "In Memory of Maxim Gorky,"[1] the story *Pehchaan* (Discriminating Taste) had the city of Delhi as its background and it was probably the first Manto story to have done so. *Hatak* (The Insult) and *Das Rupaye* (Ten Rupees) are the other such stories in the collection. Moreover, stories like *Darpok* (Coward) too have prostitutes in the background, though they concern with one or another psychological problem.

It is thus very clear that Manto acquired his grasp on the lives of prostitutes and other people related with the trade — of the likes of

Khushiya the pimp — from the four years of his sojourn in the city of Bombay. A good part of this period was such that he, then a bachelor, passed it in the company of some renowned actors; and then there also was Raja Mehdi Ali Khan who was his friend from the Lahore days and who came to be better known as a film lyricist and almost totally lost his identity as a poet despite the fact that a good part of his poetry is quite powerful. While Manto reached Bombay some time in December 1936, his marriage took place only in April 1938 and it was still one year before his wife was sent to live a family life with him.[2] It seems Manto utilised this period to the hilt to have the grasp which he assertively claimed to possess.

One can only conjecture about what gave Manto the required inspiration to probe this aspect of our life.

II

ONE thing is certain — that the world of Indian films at that time was not the least akin to what it is today. Today, it is the provider of some of the most dazzling professions in the country and offers its participants name, fame and wealth at one go, in ample terms. An actor or actress of today can easily make billions of rupees in his or her active professional life, can have huge and sprawling bungalows in one or another of the posh localities of Mumbai, Chennai or Kolkata, and can revel in the best of the parties of dance, wine and whatever else they like. It is therefore not surprising that some of the billionaires spend a lot of money to secure for their wards an entry into this most coveted profession, and some even go to the extent of themselves becoming a film producer for the purpose. As a corollary, however, the Indian film industry, and particularly the one of Mumbai, has in fact become a closed world today so that it is mostly the offspring of renowned actors and directors who find a role in films, and the possible competitors from outside are very carefully and very assiduously kept where they were --- outside. The other side of the same picture is that the very glamour of the industry deceives thousands of young boys and girls from among the *wretched of the earth*; they run away from their parents and reach Mumbai with the false hope of having a share in the glamour of this *Mayapuri*, the City of Illusions.[3] It is another thing that most of them suffer only heartbreaks at the end, land in various professions of a dubious nature, and some even commit suicide.

But this was not always so, and certainly not when Manto was

associated with the film industry, for which loaded terms like *Bollywood* and *Tinsel World* had not yet come into vogue. Journalism is today a respectable as well as paying profession but, Manto writes, there was a time when writers, journalists and editors used to sit naked in a laundry to get their clothes washed at double the rate and led a very miserable life. Not much different from journalism was the shape of the film world, and anybody associated with films was considered to be a bad character, to have a bad character, so much so that sometimes a film personality could not get on rent a flat in a respectable locality, much less have a bungalow of his own.[4] Moreover, as could only be expected in a highly male dominated society, nobody would allow his own offspring and in particular his daughter to work in a film.

It was thus that, in a society where itinerant theatre groups could use only males even for female roles (this is still the case with itinerant theatre groups in several parts of the country), it was mostly the *prostitutes* who came forward to kill that drawback. We desist from quoting the names, however, the hard fact is that many of our great — and really great — actresses of yore came from this very background; either they were themselves prostitutes or were the offspring of prostitutes, but they went up so high as to earn respect from all of us by the sheer dint of their contributions. In this sense Indian Cinema did act as a Great Leveller and, to that extent, it played a really progressive role.

Manto was in the know of the film world of his day — even when he was only indirectly associated with it while editing a film magazine and writing about the lives of actors and actresses of his day. Further, when he himself joined the industry as a script/dialogue writer, he came in direct contact with several actors, actresses and others associated with the industry, and these included those who were called prostitutes. If what Manto later said to a judge in the court is true — that "A writer picks up his pen only when his sensibility is hurt" — then it was indeed natural for a sensitive being like Manto to come out and explore the ground which many wise men feared to tread. If not always then sometimes at least, it is really the *fools* of the oft-quoted proverb who rush forward to explore the unknown grounds while the wise (or wiseacres!) sit home with their hands folded.

III

WRITING about prostitutes and pimps and the like was nothing new for Urdu writers. It was a prostitute

who was the heroine of *Fareb-e-Ishq* (*Deception of Love*), a story in verse by Mirza Shauq Lakhnavi in the mid-nineteenth century. Penned by Mirza Hadi Ruswa, a contemporary of Shauq Lakhnavi, *Umrao Jan Ada* was one of the earliest novels of Urdu, and it was based on the tumultuous life of a prostitute of the same name. We come across prostitutes in the writings of Deputy Nazeer Ahmed, Pundit Ratan Nath Sarshar, Meer Amman and several other writers. And then the first major novel by Munshi Premchand has a prostitute as its central character. Hindi-speaking readers know it as *Sevasadan* (*The House of Service*), but the original Urdu title *Bazaar-e-Husn* (*The Market of Beauty*) is much more appropriate and revealing.

Therefore, Manto certainly broke no new ground when he began to write about the lives and travails of prostitutes. But what distinguishes him from other writers is the starkness with which he paints his pictures. One can well understand this point if one compares, for example, Turgenev with Dostoyevsky: compared with Turgenev with his high-class ladies and maidens, his chivalrous youth and his ballroom dances, Dostoyevsky's pictures are far starker. If one compares Mirza Ruswa's *Umrao Jan Ada* with Manto's *Sultana* or *Saugandhi*, the same difference comes out in full glare.

The following sketch provides an illustration to the point:

"The room was very small, and innumerable things were lying scattered all around. Three or four drying and rotting *chappals* (sandals) were lying there under the bed. An eczematous dog was sleeping there with its snout on these *chappals*, and was in its sleep making faces over some imaginary thing. The body of the dog had become hairless at several places because of the eczema. If only someone had seen this dog from a distance, he would have thought it was a piece of an old *taat* that one uses as a doormat to wipe his soles clean.

"Items of decoration were lying there in a niche on one side — the rouge that is applied on the cheeks, a red stick for the lips, powder, comb, iron pins that she probably used in her hairs. Close by, a cage with a green parrot was hanging from a long peg and the parrot was sleeping with its beak hidden in the feathers on its back. The cage was full of pieces of raw guava and peels of rotting oranges. Black mosquitoes and other tiny insects were flying on these foul-smelling pieces.

"A chair of cane was there near the bed; its back was getting oily and sticky as it was always used as the support for heads. To the right of the chair there was a beautiful tripod, with a portable His Master's Voice gramophone on it. The black cover-cloth of this gramophone was in a tattered shape. Its rusted needles were lying scattered on the tripod and in all parts of the room. Just above this tripod there were hanging four frames and there were photos of various people in those frames".[5]

This kind of description is certainly heavens apart from the romanticised image of a prostitute who was patronised, and often thereby monopolised, by a raja or a nawab of yore. Manto's was not an age of feudal chivalry and pompous demonstrations; it was in fact an age when capitalism with its stress on the supremacy of wealth had already started baring its fangs in India. That is why a moneybag, riding a car, could have the guts to insult a human being like *Saugandhi* without having a bit of concern for her sentiments. This is what leaves *Saugandhi* or Manto! Saddened to the core:

"When she was near her house, all the happening came up in her heart like a throbbing grief, and covered all her pores like pain. Her legs again grew heavy and she again began to feel intensely that only a little while ago a man had called her out from her home, to the market, and there he had given a slap of torchlight on her face and had thus insulted her. As soon as the thought occurred to her, she felt the pressure of someone's powerful thumb on her ribs, just like someone viewing her like a goat or a sheep — and trying to check whether it was all hair only or was there any meat in her body.

"That *seth*….. may God….." *Saugandhi* wished to curse the man but then she thought what the use of cursing him was….. It would have been a thing of joy if only he would have been there in front of her and she could jot down so many curses on every particle of his existence….. that she could say for him some such words as would keep him restless for the rest of his life….. If only she could tear all her clothes, get stark naked, and ask him: "Ye had come for this very thing *na*….. Take it….. take it free, without any price….. But whatever I'm, whatever it's there inside me, even your father can't buy it, what of ye….."[6]

It is evident that *Saugandhi* was not so fortunate as was *Umrao Jan Ada* whose lover killed somebody of a humbler stock, one who was itching for her company, and then the body of that somebody was disposed of with impunity. *Saugandhi* could, at

the best, only feel an impotent rage vis-a-vis the moneybag who had the guts to insult her.

It is this world of *Saugandhi* and *Sultana* and *Neeti*, of Sarita and Siraj and Shobha Bai, of *Babu Gopi Nath* and Mohammad Tufail and Dhudu which we see our Manto loitering with and exploring. And it is not surprising that, as was his wont, Manto — the keen observer that he was — explored each and every pillar, each and every post of this world that had no romance in it but only horrors and repulsions. If at all there is anything surprising in it, it is that he reached the high status of a master craftsman so early in his literary career. The quotations given above come from the story *Hatak* (The Insult) which appeared in 1940 while the first Manto story had appeared only six years earlier, in 1934.

The fact is that if *Toba Tek Singh* has no parallel in regard to a portrayal of the horrors of Partition, *Hatak* too remains unparalleled to date in its depiction of the frightening life of a modern-day prostitute of the ordinary rut. It was said and not very incorrectly that what if God gave Manto only forty two years and a few months and a few days to live, Manto has given Saugandhi centuries indeed. If *Mutari* (Urinal) was a very small but tightly packed story, no less tightly packed is *Hatak* — not for a single moment has Manto lost his grip whether on the flow of events or on the stream of consciousness in this short story which is not so short after all. It could well offer a less competent writer plenty of chances to go astray.

IV

One of the most important Manto stories in this category is the story *License* which shows how our society, our very religious and pious and great Indian society, forces a hapless girl (here a young widow) into prostitution — even though she wants to earn her bread by dint of her pious labour and even though she is quite competent to do so. (Sahir wondered and challenged: Where are the ones who are so proud of India!?) Though the story was one in a collection of stories that came out in 1950, it evidently refers to a period when a license could well be procured (and granted) for prostitution, as could be in Alexander Kuprin's immortal *Yama*. In this world of Manto, the City Committee very clearly tells Inaayat *aka* Neeti that she could not get a license to drive a *tonga* though she could of course get a license to sell her body — if she so desired. But what of this damned City

Committee; this is a world where every worthless Tom, Dick and Harry (every Mangaru, Ghurahu and Katwaru, if you want the indigenous substitutes!) won't allow a hapless widow to live a peaceful life. It is another thing that one still finds constrained to ask oneself whether any of the basics of the situation have at all changed in the last six decades, since Manto's days.

No less hapless is Shobha Bai in the story *Fobha Bai*, though in a different way. While she is, so to say, the *widow* of a deceased timber merchant who had opened a film company for her and who had given her a lot of jewellery, a car and other valuable items, after him she is living and continuing in the profession for the sake of her only son who she has left back — incognito — in Jaipur. But, the story says, God extinguishes even this lone lamp in her otherwise dark life, and now bereft of her only emotional support, she finally goes insane. It seems she had found a well-wisher and sympathiser in the person of Dr Khan, but that was obviously a support not so strong that it could hold her in senses.

Ten Rupees and *Discriminating Taste* are about the people who, out of their compulsions, throw even minor girls into the abyss of prostitution. Sarita of the first-mentioned story does not even know what an intimate physical contact between a male and a female feels like. The nameless girl of the second-mentioned story appears to be knowing about it, but without having any idea of the aesthetic side of such a contact.

Equally hapless is the nameless woman of *A Hundred Candle-Power Bulb*, and, if you ask, no less hapless is her selfish-looking husband — or companion, whatsoever he may have been. While the man forces the woman to go out to sell her body, it is because of sheer compulsion, while the woman is unable to have even a bit of sleep, and it appears it is she who finally goes to the extent of killing her husband — or companion, whatsoever he may have been. And the horror of horrors is that she is found having some sleep while a dead body is lying just beside her. But, true to his observation, Manto depicts this situation as the fallout of a powerful storm that had swept the subcontinent. Here he is evidently referring to the country's partition with all the horrors that it begot. The very first paragraph of the story brings this fact out — quite harshly and unmistakably.

Who the culprits of this haplessness

are? This comes out, for example, from the story *Shaghal* (The Hobby) which does bear an imprint of Maxim Gorky's style of story-telling.

Yet another attempt at identification of the culprits is found in the story *Siraj* in which a girl of the same name elopes with her lover from her home and eventually suffers betrayal. While living amid *kotha*-owning ladies and pimps, she still manages to keep her chastity intact, as it seems she still has some hope, but then..... If Siraj finally tells Dhudu that her lover is "sleeping" and that "I've put up my *burqa* on him….." there is no telling whether her lover is really sleeping or whether Siraj has finally avenged the crime she was subjected to. In any case, at the end of it all, she has nowhere to go but to the same abyss after she comes from Lahore back to Bombay.

The compulsion to accept one's fate, so to say, is also evident in the story *Anjam ba-Khair* (It All Ended Well), in which Naseem Akhtar, a prostitute's offspring, wants to say adieu to the profession and lead a respectable life but is not allowed to do so. Like Neeti of *License,* she too is compelled to prostitute herself and when she goes into it, she goes with a vengeance — *a la* Siraj. Another notable aspect of this story is the illusion which the demand and then the creation of Pakistan created for a large chunk of the Muslim population of the subcontinent. Naseem Akhtar says: "The Qaid-e-Azam took too much trouble to get Pakistan for the Muslims….. We should now be living there," and that *their religion* and *our religion* are not one. However, as for Naseem's decision to go to the coveted land of Pakistan because she thinks no Muslim is safe here in India, there is no telling whether it is due to her own perception or it is due to a situation which her own music teacher, Khan Saheb Achchhan Khan, contrives in his own narrow interest, in order to intensify the panic she is feeling. As we know, Manto is never so open and leaves many things for his readers to judge.

Baghair Ijazat (Without Permission) is a light story with not much of a gist. It only tells us that the *kotha* of a prostitute is the only place where no permission is required to go in.

Except some insights here and there, there is not much weight in four other stories either; these are *Miss Mala*, *Qadira the Butcher*, *From Peshawar to Lahore* and *A Pious and a Pros*.[7] The same can be said about *Marriage* and *The Peddler Girl*. In the last-mentioned story, a girl spurns the true love of one with whom she

elopes, and then receives the wages of this betrayal.

However, from the story *Qadira the Butcher* we do get a meaningful insight. The story says: "At the time, the demand for the formation of Pakistan was at its peak. At last there was an announcement, and Eidan heard it on her five-valve radio set, that Hindstan had been divided into two. And then started the riots. The Hindus were killing the Muslims and the Muslims were killing the Hindus. A strange kind of situation was there. Blood was getting cheaper than water." It was in this situation that "Muslims were migrating to Pakistan in droves so that their lives could be safe," just like what Naseem Akhtar thinks in the story "It All Ended Well." But when Eidan Bai was on her way to Pakistan, "her own Muslim brethren looted her dancing costumes and the remaining of her ornaments en route." Isn't it akin to the fate of gang-rape which Sakina suffers in the story *Khol-Do* (Open It!) at the hands of her own co-religionist volunteers and so called saviours?

The meaning is clear: If a man decides to turn a brute, his religion —with all its moralistic pontifications, does not and cannot prevent him from brutalising his own, less powerful co-religionists, what to talk of those from other religions.

This is what Manto had been doing all along: to fight the illusions which had gripped the people. At what high cost to himself — this we all know.

Dooda the Wrestler is about a man who is devoted to his master and sacrifices even his chastity[8] in order to rescue his characterless master from a crisis which is the latter's own creation. There is no moralising here. But the story graphically illustrates, the extent the vice of prostitution can go to, in order to harm its perpetrators and avenge their victims.

V

But if Gandhian Philosophy provided no way out of the communal divide, as Manto stressed in his story *Swaraj ke Liye* (For Swaraj), can philanthropy, howsoever well-meaning and pure-hearted it may be, provide a cure for the vice of prostitution? In *Haarta Chala Gaya* (Losing All Along), Gangu Bai tells the nameless *seth* something very clearly:

"He stopped then and there. Very slowly, as if swallowing each and every word, Gangu Bai said: "I'm very bad, true….. but w'o is good 'ere?..... Seth, you spend ten rupees to see one light off….. Jus' see aroun'

'ow many lights are on 'ere!

"He moved aside and cast a glance on the shops all along the street; all of them had similar railings. It was a non-ending line and innumerable lights were on in the dusty atmosphere of the night.

"Can you get all these lights off?

Through his thick-lens specs he first regarded the bulb hanging over Gangu Bai's head and then the dusty face of the woman. His head hung down and he said: "No Gangu Bai, no!" When he boarded the taxi, his heart was as empty as his pocket was.

It is very clear that the malady is sitting quite deep in the very uterus of our society, and mere philanthropic, much less cosmetic efforts may not suffice to uproot it. This is again a typical Manto attempt at myth-breaking.

VI

It is in this kind of milieu that Manto comes up with a story like *1919 ki Ek Baat* (An Episode of 1919), and one need not be told that the year holds a very important place in the history of modern India. The very first story by Manto, *Tamasha* (Spectacle) was based on the horrors of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre; he refers to it in *Swaraj ke Liye* (For Swaraj) and some other of his creations, and the abovementioned story also has the same massacre as its background. One may well surmise that the massacre kept haunting our writer as ominously as it haunted tens of thousands of other Indians.

But, differently from those thousands of others, Manto saw in this very episode a rare glimpse of valour and courage to face an ominous set of rulers. Mohammad Tufail aka Thaila Kanjar is the son of a prostitute and the brother of two young prostitutes, but it is he who stands up to the imperialist atrocities when the moment of reckoning comes. He is killed, his body is dotted with bullets, as he refuses to run away and, when the hour comes, he avenges the helplessness of his countrymen by facing a group of the British soldiers and taking the life of one of them before breathing his last. *By any standard of the freedom-loving peoples, this was indeed a noble revenge* — not like that depicted by N M Raashid in a poem *Intiqaam* (Revenge) whose lone and central character has night-long sex with a British lady and thinks that he has "avenged the helplessness of his countrymen."[9] This is what Georg Lukacs (Writer and Critic) would have described as an *impotent revolt* or *pseudo-revolt* — if only he had

come to know about the poem referred to here. The revolt by this "*kanjar*" (a prostitute's son) has something far nobler, far more valiant, far more laudable in it. Moreover, it is a deed which his own sisters could well have emulated but — to Manto's grief — didn't.

This is another instance typical of Manto — to search for humaneness, if only a speck of humaneness, even in the most unlikely of places and people. Incidentally, the story referred to here offers us yet another ground to think. It says at one place:

"Amritsar - the same Amritsar that was the biggest centre of the freedom struggle, whose chest once harboured a matter-of-pride kind of injury like the Jallianwala Bagh - what's its condition now? But just leave this story apart; it gives the heart a great pain. The people say that the British are responsible also for whatever took place in this holy city five years before this day. Maybe it's true, Bhai Jan, but if you ask for the truth, our own hands are smeared with the blood that was shed there. Anyhow!"

Here "whatever took place in this holy city five years before this day" simply means the events that took place in the period 1946-48, preceding and following the Partition.

The logic is simple: Laying the blame for everything at the door of the British rulers may have a grain of truth, but then it will remain only a grain of truth. The fact remains that it is we who are, in the main, responsible for what happened then, and that the British only took advantage of the cleavages that had already been existing in our society. This was nothing surprising for a country that "has no care for its own honour and prestige."

But if the British "didn't even realise that a pros too has an honour of her own," the case of us Indians is not very different either. In fact it was this very insensitivity of our society which dragged Manto more than once to the court. In *Yama*, Kuprin says about the same social ailment called prostitution: "The horror is that there is no horror," and we are certainly no better than what the Russians were in Kuprin's days; we too don't feel any horror over a horror. But it was this very kind of people who hated Manto, and abused Manto, and harassed Manto, for the simple reason that he tried to tell them what their ailments were — even though he was not the proprietor of a medical clinic, as he once said about himself, and could not treat these ailments. Yet, is there any wonder that our society could not but feel incensed when Manto put his finger

on the ailing vein? Great!

VII

As mentioned earlier, what is typical of Manto literature is a search for humaneness, if only a speck of humaneness, even in the most unlikely of places and people.

Most of the stories by Manto — whether on 'lowly' men and women or on other issues confirm it.

For instance, one such story is *Sharda*, whose main character of the same name is not a prostitute in the strict sense of the term though we see her staying in a third grade hotel which *was and was not* a brothel at one and the same time. The first aspect of her personality, of which we get a glimpse, is of a caring sister, full of concern; if she comes from Jaipur to Bombay, it is in order to retrieve her younger sister from the flesh trade into which she has been dragged against her volition. Even though *Sharda* has been deserted by her husband and has thus got a bitter taste in her mouth in the name of marriage, her virtually lone desire is to see that her sister, Shakuntala, should get married to a suitable person so that she could be able to lead a life of honour.

And then comes the most humane aspect of Sharda's personality — as the mother of a very small, one year old girl child. As a destitute young woman who has been deserted by her husband, and who has nowhere to go except her old mother, it is quite natural that she clings to the man who she sees loving her child just the way only a caring father could love. One can therefore well surmise that Sharda must have seen in Nazeer a person who could provide her a degree of security and honour in society. The importance of this point can well be grasped if we keep in mind that in India, what to talk of Manto's days, even today a young girl finds herself surrounded by a pack of wolves who can, if only they get a chance, brutalise a girl or woman in the very broad daylight. Though Kareem, a pimp, does not represent this breed, he is no less a wolf in his own way; it is he who had got Shakuntala in his net. It is in this situation that Sharda comes to live with Nazeer when the latter's wife migrates to Lahore after communal riots start in the city. A passage from the story reads:

"Whenever he pressed Sharda to his chest, she never refused but now it was not the same Sharda….. No, Sharda was still the same Sharda, but she was now something more. After a separation so long, the devotion of her body had indeed intensified

manifold, she still wanted him by her heart and soul, but Nazeer felt Sharda now lacked her earlier attraction or whatever it was which she then had".

The story thus makes it perfectly clear that if at all someone has changed, it's not Sharda in fact. Let's note what Kareem tells Nazeer after Sharda leaves for Jaipur. He says: "Nazeer Saheb, Sharda was really in love with you." An equally important fact is that if Sharda comes back to Bombay, leaving her infant daughter behind in the custody of her mother, it is only because of her love for Nazeer. Thus the person to have changed is the male called Nazeer who feels, without any ground whatsoever, that it's Sharda who has lost her earlier attraction. This is in total contrast to the earlier situation when:

"Nazeer didn't know what love meant; he only knew that Sharda had a physical devotion and that she was the most appropriate answer to his male questions. He didn't know anything more".

At that time, in fact, "Nazeer was convinced of her physical devotion; she was purity personified insofar as the body was concerned."

As for Nazeer, what type of a man he is? One who has been deceiving his wife and does not feel anything except some momentary remorse about it!

The result of the change which Nazeer undergoes is anybody's guess. Getting humiliated by Nazeer, a male, Sharda finally leaves his house but takes with herself only whatever really belonged to her. This much self-respect she obviously has: she didn't take with her anything that belonged to Nazeer; nor did she feel any need to wait for being compensated by Nazeer in any way. At one stage in *An Episode of 1919*, the narrator says (or asks!?): ".....a pros too has an honour of her own….. She can definitely have….. Why she can't have…..?" and this is no less true of Sharda who did engage in prostitution but was not, to repeat, a prostitute in the strict sense of the term.

It is in this situation that Nazeer "entered the room with a saddened heart, only to find that there was a pack of his favourite cigarettes on the tripod — quite full." But what could be done now! Sharda had left forever, and for some unknown destination without even telling his servant where she was going. And why should she have told anybody about where she was going? Had her man left any scope for her for being that

much optimistic?

VIII

No less self-respect *Shanti* has — a young girl who suffered deception in love. (She is just like most of Manto's prostitutes are: not only destitute but also deceived by a lover or a husband!). After Shanti ran away from home in Srinagar, she has been trying all along to save her soul.[10] *Shanti* is the prototype of what we today call a "call girl" and (unlike Sharda) she has entered the trade in a very conscious manner. But, has she really her soul in it? All along, her behaviour does tell us that she is only biding her time (just as Sahay, a pimp, was biding his time, in a story of the same title), and that she would kick the profession aside once she gets a chance. This chance she gets in the person of Maqbool:

"When both sat on the bed, Shanti moved her head aside and put it in Maqbool's lap. Her tears had as if forgotten how to stop. Maqbool loved her, told her to stop crying, and she said, deep in tears, in a faltering voice: "Over there..... in Srinagar, a man had killed me..... Here a man has now..... resurrected me."

And when Maqbool offers her fifty rupees, the fee which she charges from any customer, "With much fury and hatred, Shanti picked up the notes and threw them down. Then, in great haste, she opened a drawer of her dressing table and said: Look..... see w'at is 'ere!"

It's here that we get a glimpse of Shanti's humaneness as well as her sense of self-respect. For it's a number of hundred rupee notes which were lying there in the drawer, and these are the notes which she had got from Maqbool and which she had kept safe without spending a pie out of it. Shanti then takes a handful of them and tosses them in the air: "I no needin' them now." The end of the story makes it clear that what she really craves for is not money but a loving friend — something which she now feels she has got.

A similar type of girl is the unnamed Burmese girl — in the story *Burmi Ladki* — who appears willing to go to any extent in order to heartily serve the person from whom she gets a small speck of love and concern. Who she is and where she has come from, we don't know a bit of it. We only know that she serves with full devotion the person who has brought her to his house. And then, with a sense of utmost self-respect, she leaves the place when she is told to go — without taking from the house anything that does not belong to her. In the meantime she has of course

won the hearts of the three servants as well as one of the two inmates.

Bego is totally different from Sharda, Shanti or the unnamed Burmese girl. She is a simple-hearted girl living in Batot, a hilly town of Kashmir, one who doesn't even know what it means if a man kisses her lips. But then she has the fortune of being loved by someone and then, very soon, she has the misfortune of being spurned by the same someone, and in that very state of dejection she hurls herself into the flesh trade with a vengeance — *a la* Siraj and Naseem Akhtar. So much so that she contracts TB from some of the patients who come to her town to recuperate their health, and then meets her death. Though the story *Bego* appeared in Manto's second collection that came out in 1940, it lacks the finesse which the story *Hatak* (The Insult), included in the same collection, has. Unlike the stark realism of *Hatak*, what this story betrays is a superficial romantic view of life, which we are not much accustomed to associate with Manto. It is quite probable that the two stories must have been written in two different time zones, even if the gap between them couldn't have been more than a year or two, or three at the most.

Compared to *Bego*, the story *Jaanki* brings to our view a totally different type of character. *Jaanki* is by no means a prostitute, whether of a brothel inmate kind or a call girl kind.[11] *Jaanki* appears to be a very independent kind of person — in order to get a job in a film company, she travels all alone from Peshawar to Bombay and then to Pune, in the pre-independence period, while even today numerous (if not all) Indian girls can't dare travel alone, without the security a man provides. But the most important trait of her personality seems to be that to the men from whom she gets just a wee bit of love, she returns it in the same kind — and in full measure, many times over. There is Aziz (a married man but having an affair with Jaanki) and there is Saeed (who has already kicked out one girl friend, before he meets Jaanki), and it is these men whom she serves with full devotion, and who she takes care of with utmost concern, and that too without any worry about a material gain in any form. But, then, what she gets in return? Nothing but humiliation, and nothing but an attempt at monopolisation — something which is so typical of male chau..... (Readers are free to fill up this gap in any way they please.) Her disposition finally brings her to the door of death, from which she is saved by Narayan —- by the very person who she had developed a hatred for. To what extent Narayan goes in order to save

her, has in itself a small bit of hilariousness — it displays the same kind of jovial conduct which Narayan displays in the *Aao!* (*Come!*) series of radio dramas which Manto wrote for the All India Radio.

Incidentally, Manto, himself a character in this story, says at one place: "There was also an extent of relief with the thinking that the doors of every film company were open for a woman if she was young; what was there to feel so nervous about it! She could get a place in one or another film company even without my help." This remark takes us back to our contention, earlier expressed, that the world of films in Manto's days was not a bit like what we see it today. Those were the days when anybody associated with the film line was considered a bad character, avoided by the society at large, and when nobody called respectable would allow his offspring, more so his daughter, to work in a film. It was in such a milieu that the so called prostitutes, or women like *Jaanki*, filled up a very serious gap in character casting.

However, compared to all these stories, the story *Sarkando ke Peechhe* (Behind the Reeds) stands on a totally different footing. Here the girl, who has been given the pseudonym of Nawab, does engage in prostitution, but without even knowing that whatever she is doing is prostitution and is something hated by the wider society. Manto specifically says:

"Though she was by all means a lowly woman in the sense in which our respectable and pious ladies regard such women, to tell the truth, she had absolutely no idea that she was leading a life of sin. And how could she think of a sin if she knew not a thing about sin"!

However, at the end of the story, and this end reads like a tale of horror, it is this simple-minded girl who is made to pay the price — with her very life — for the fault of someone else. Even after a gap of decades, the present writer still and quite vividly remembers the shudder which ran through his body when he read this story for the first time.

IX

The story *Kali Shalwar* (The Black Trouser) is regarded as one of the best short stories penned by Manto. With the pre-independence Delhi as its setting, the story may be regarded as *an exercise in starkness*, with Sultana being far, far, far away from the romantic image of a courtesan *a la* Umrao Jan Ada. The poor fellow sells her body, and she well knows what

she is doing, but is still unable to make the two ends meet. The month of Muharram is fast approaching but she can't even manage to have just four and a half yards of satin in order to get a black *shalwar* (female trouser with a drawstring) stitched.

By the way, like several Manto creations, this story too makes fun of *our religion* versus *their religion* kind of thinking which Naseem Akhtar kind of people cherished. When Sultana accuses Shankar that he is making fun of the holy men of the Muslim community because he is a Hindu, he very categorically says with a smile: "The Hindu-Muslim question doesn't come up in such places. If even great pundits and *maulvis* come here, they would turn gentlemen." And what is it that makes Sultana accuse Shankar of making fun of Muslim saints? It is simply that Shankar mercilessly brings his hammer down upon the superstitions which Khudabakhsh harboured: ".....in order to get the lock of his fate opened, for several days he has been going to a *Khuda-raseeda fakir* (God Fearing medicant) whose own fate is fixed like a rusted lock." Yet another instance of Manto's inclination towards myth-breaking!

All-time great short stories like *Babu Gopinath* and *Mummy* (The Mother) fall in a totally different genre, if only because the main characters of these stories do not fit in the readymade moulds. Neither is *Babu Gopinath* an ordinary type of customer (or "passenger"), one who goes to prostitutes in order to get his lust satisfied, nor is the *Mummy* by any stretch of imagination a prostitute who is out to have in her net as many moneybags as possible. Instead, they are individuals who wholeheartedly love the persons connected with them and always worry about them. About the Mummy's house, Manto even says:

"While starting from Prabhat Nagar, I had thought that it must be something like a brothel, but nothing of that house confirmed this idea. The house was as respectable as any average Christian house is".

Anyhow, without going into the details of these two personalities, who are real-life characters, we can only say that they are in fact so different from the ordinary rut that they — or their incarnations around us — could well serve as cases for psychological studies. The personality of *Babu Gopinath* is such that he deliberately prefers to be cheated but avoids calling one's bluff lest he or she is hurt.

To the query why he has a liking

for the prostitutes' brothels and fakirs' hospices, *Babu Gopinath* very candidly replies:

"Because these are two such places where there is deception from the floor to the roof….. If someone wants to deceive himself, what better place he can have"?

The logic is very clear, and very eye-opening:

.....who does not know that parents make their children do prostitution in brothels and men make their God do prostitution in *dargahs* and hospices!

Yet one must not dare forget that it was the same *Babu Gopinath* — the same person who had misspent all his money on prostitutes, pimps and small or big fraudsters like the Ghaffar Sai — who stretches every nerve of his body to get Zeenat, a prostitute girl, settled in life. His main worry, his first priority in life, is that this simple-minded girl must get settled well before he, her self-appointed patron, leaves the world of 'wise' men and women forever; to him it does not matter whether she gets settled through marriage with a respectable person or by learning some of the tricks which prostitutes adopt to extract money from their customers. Manto, who himself is a character in this story, has no illusion whatsoever about Babu Gopinath; he specifically says that he is a person weak in faith:

As a proof of his weakness of faith, Ghaffar Sai was already there —- whom, as per Sando, *Babu Gopinath* had brought here as his legal advisor. By the term "legal advisor," Sando really meant that Babu Gopinath had a deep faith in Ghaffar Sai.

Yet we see the same person having a great sense of comfort when Zeenat, his Zeenat, is married to a big landlord from Hyderabad Sindh — it is as if he, *Babu Gopinath*, has achieved the biggest goal of his life!

But we find the moral — yes, moral — of this story somewhere else, in the story *Nutfa* (The Sperm) where the unknown letter-writer says:

.....there indeed ought to be such persons *who the society could use as a slap on its own face* and on the face of the laws it has devised (italics added).

Was it therefore any unnatural, was it without reason, was there anything astonishing in the fact that Manto had to face the wrath of many custodians of religion and their so called morality?

X

NOTHING much needs to be said about the Mummy — the main character of the story of the same name; the better if one reaches one's own conclusion about her. Here we can only quote what Chaddha said about her, though not without daring to italicise a few words:

"The government didn't like her ways. It didn't like her manners of living….. The gatherings at her house were objectionable to the administration….. *The police wanted her affections and her love as the ransom….. They called her "Mummy" but wanted her to act as a pimp…..* For a long time a case involving her was under investigation. The government finally satisfied itself with the police investigation and then it threw her out….. It exiled her from the city. *If she was a prostitute, if she was a broker….. if her existence was a threat to the society, it should have been put to an end. But why has the filth of Pune told that you should leave this place; you better go somewhere else and join some other heap of garbage…..*

Let us recall: it was the same Chaddha whose very personality the piety of that very "filth of Pune" had once purified!

Anyhow, one of the most notable things in such stories is that we do see a *Ganja Farishta* (Bald Angel) — whose name was Sa'adat Hassan Manto — as one of the characters in stories like *Mummy* and *Babu Gopinath* and numerous others. Is there anything surprising in it? We think not. It's not simply a case, a glaring case, of reality being more dramatic and more interesting and more telling than fiction. Isn't it that even a piece of reality needs someone to make it more dramatic more interesting and more telling than the fiction? ■

References

1) It may be that he wrote this story soon after listening the news of Gorky's demise in 1936; he after all was emotionally close to Chekhov and Gorky.

2) In traditional families in earlier days, a girl was not sent to her husband immediately after marriage, but only after a gap which could be anything from one year to five years, depending on the ages of the bride and groom.

This custom of sending a married girl to her husband was called *rukhsati* among the Muslims and *gauna* among the Hindus. The couple were not supposed to meet in this period.

3) According to a survey referred to by Naseeruddin Shah, a renowned actor, in his *And Then One Day*, the average number of such youth reaching Mumbai is 500 a day, which means 1,82,500 a year — really a staggering figure!

4) One of the well known episodes in this regard is here. When Guru Dutt, a renowned actor and director, saw that his shirt was not yet washed by the laundryman, he unwittingly picked up and wore Dev Anand's shirt and went out. Then, by chance, Dev Anand spotted him wearing his shirt — an event that gave rise to a lasting friendship.

5) From the story *Hatak* (Insult). All the quotations in this article have been translated by the present author.

6) Ibid.

7) The last three of these stories were among the creations of Manto's daily quota of toil when he wrote a story a day. Many of these stories are really superficial.

8) This is supposed to be the most coveted thing for a wrestler who is required, before starting his career, to take a vow that he would abstain from women and wine.

9) Manto has made fun of this very poem and this kind of thinking in his story *Pehchaan* (Discriminating Taste) also.

10) We may well recall the behaviour pattern Siraj displays, in a story of the same title.

11) Who said Manto wrote only about prostitutes! No, many of them are about the women who were no prostitutes but whom our very pious society regarded as lowly.