

SAADAT HASAN MANTO

Touchstone*

IT'S TIME FOR SQUEAKY NEW THINGS: new shoes, new stumbling blocks, new laws, new crimes, new clocks, new disruptions, new masters, new slaves More amazing, even the hide of the new slaves isn't like the old hide. It's been flogged so often it's become modern. Now they're devising newer switches and whips.

Literature is new too. It comes in various packages, too numerous to count. Some call it "progressive," others "reactionary," some "obscene," others a "champion of the worker." And new touchstones are at the ready to determine the value of this new literature! Pray, what are these touchstones but literary journals, annuals, monthlies, weeklies, dailies. Their editors and owners are new too. One is for Pakistan, the other for undivided India, is a Congressite or a Communist. And each keeps measuring new literature only by their own yardstick, telling us what is true in it and what is false. But literature isn't gold that one can be told its fluctuating rate. It's an ornament, and just as pretty jewelry isn't always unalloyed gold, neither is a beautiful piece of writing pure reality. To rub it over and over again on the touchstone like a piece of gold is the height of tastelessness.

Literature is either literature or it is the worst kind of offense. An item of jewelry is either jewelry or an outrageous monstrosity. Literature and its opposite aren't much different than jewelry.

This is a period of new aches and pains, new cries. As if by caesarian section, a new period is being forced out of the old. The old period is in tears over its impending death, while the newborn is crying from the joy of life. Their throats have become raspy from so much crying, and their eyes wet. And authors have dipped their pens in this wetness and are writing away. New literature? It's the same old language, only the accent has changed. Well, this new accent is what's called new literature, pro-

*"Kasauṭī," *Savērā* No. 3 (n.d.), 60–62.

gressive literature, obscene literature, or literature praising the worker.

When a man bursts into tears in the midst of laughing, when a melodic mode shifts abruptly from adagio to allegro, when a child suddenly starts to sob inconsolably, a person doesn't run to a sound meter to measure the change. Anyone endowed with probity and taste will try to puzzle out the *reasons* that have prompted the change.

Literature isn't a portrayal of an individual's own life. When a person sets out to write, he doesn't jot down the daily account of his domestic affairs, nor does he mention his personal joys and sorrows, or his personal illness or health. It's entirely likely that the tears in his pen-portraits belong to his afflicted sister, the smiles come from you, and the laughter from some down-and-out laborer. To weigh them against one's own tears, smiles, and laughter is a grievous error. Every creative piece seeks to convey a particular mood, a particular effect, and a specific purpose. If that mood, effect, and purpose remain unappreciated, the piece will be nothing more than a lifeless object.

Literature isn't a corpse that a doctor and his interns can lay on a stone table and perform an autopsy. Literature isn't some kind of sickness, it's a reaction to it, and it isn't some kind of medicine that you have to be told when to use it and how much. Literature is a thermometer that reads the temperature of one's country and people. Its job is to tell us about the well-being or sickness of our country and nation. Just stretch out your hand and pick up some dusty volume from the old bookcase and you'll feel the pulse of a bygone age beating beneath your fingers.

Countless centuries have passed. Countless generations are buried in those centuries. It looks as if we're standing right at the top of an immense pile of dead bodies, staring down into a bottomless sea, and when we look up at the sky we feel we're in close proximity to it. But in no time at all there will be a new century and our children will be standing on top of our dead bodies. They'll think they're at the summit. But where is the corpse of the very first century, and what condition is it in? No one knows anything. The story of Adam is still the same. A man and a woman, two women and a man, or two men and a woman. This has been going on from the beginning of time and it will endure till the end of time.

In the past man felt hunger. He still does. He craved power, he still does. He loves poetry and wine today as much as he ever did. So what change are we talking about? Nothing has changed. Bread, woman, and dominion, and—when we're fed up with these—God, a force even more incomprehensible than bread, woman, and dominion, and no less accessible.

When a man loves a woman, the story of Heer and Ranjha is born;

when he loves bread, the philosophy of Epicurus comes into being; and when he loves dominion, he is transformed into an Alexander, a Genghis, a Timur, or a Hitler. And if he turns to God, he becomes a Mahatma, a Buddha.

The world is boundless. One man regards the killing of even an ant as the greatest sin; another exterminates millions of human beings with impunity, indeed he considers it an act of courage and bravery. While one man considers religion a curse, the other reckons it a blessing. So, by what standard should one judge man? Although just about every religion claims to have a measure to judge, where is that single measure that could be applied equally to all nations, religions, and human beings, the one you could use for me and I for you? Where is that single righteous scale in which you might weigh a Hindu or a Muslim, a Christian or a Jew, a black man or a white man without distinction?

Such a scale, if it exists at all, will not be new or old, progressive or reactionary, naked or covered, smutty or pure. The balance of man's actions can only be weighed in such a scale. To even think of another kind of scale is the greatest foolishness in my opinion.

Everyone wants to throw a stone at someone, to judge the actions of someone. This is man's nature. Nothing can change it. So I say: if you're dead set on pelting me with stones, do it with a little style. I'm not about to let a man who lacks style and finesse crack open my skull. If you don't know how, then learn. You learn how to pray and fast, and how to behave in gatherings, after all. Why not learn how to throw stones properly?

You resort to a hundred different stratagems to make God happy, but I'm so close to you, it's your duty to make me happy too. I'm not asking for much, am I? By all means, call me names. I don't find that offensive—swearing isn't unnatural—but at least do it decently so your mouth doesn't begin to stink and my sense of decency isn't offended.

If there is a touchstone, it is this sense of decorum, the only touchstone that can appraise all of man's actions, his sins, his rewards, his poetry, his short stories....

The so-called critics, I have no interest in them. Nitpicking can only show how to pull the petals off and scatter them, not how to gather them together into a flower.

Countless critics have come and gone, but they haven't managed to purge literature of its impurities; numerous prophets have come and gone, but mankind remains divided. Surely this is a great tragedy. But like it or not, this tragedy is the fate of mankind, its life and its death, its youth and old age. This tragic pain is Saadat Hasan Manto, and it is also you, indeed it is the whole world, which is teeming with touchstones but has

little to appraise, which has plenty of stone-throwers but few stones to throw. □

—*Translated by Mubammad Umar Memon*