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Ismat-Faroshi (Prostitution)*

SELLING HER VIRTUE (*‘iṣmat-farōshī*)¹ is not something that goes against reason or infringes any law. It is a profession; women who engage in it meet certain societal needs. If something is available in the market and customers exist for it, this should not surprise us. And neither should we object to the means by which women earn their living, even if one of those means happens to be selling their bodies, for their customers are found in every city.

Virtue-selling is considered a grave sin. Maybe it is a grave sin. Here, I do not wish to pursue it from a religious point of view. By plunging into the maze of sin and reward, crime and recompense one can hardly expect to reflect on this issue with a cool head. Religion is a formidable problem in itself. If I were to probe the issue from a religious perspective, I would get nowhere. So now I will put religion aside and proceed.

What, precisely, is virtue-selling? Well, it is to sell the jewel believed to be a woman’s most precious ornament. What further boosts its value is our experience of how a woman loses her respect and dignity in society once she has lost this jewel. This jewel is lost in many ways: after marriage thanks to her husband; sometimes a man takes it from her forcibly; sometimes out of wedlock when she surrenders it willingly to the man she loves; sometimes she sells it when circumstances compel her and sometimes she trades in it.

Here, I want to talk about the last category: women who sell their bodies as a profession. Although it is evident that this priceless jewel can be lost or sold only once, not over and over again, nevertheless, inasmuch

“‘iṣmat-Farōshī*,” from the author’s collection *Manṭō kē Mazāmin* (Lahore: Idāra-e Adabiyāt-e Nau, 1966), 155–72.

¹Literally, “*‘iṣmat*” means “innocence,” preservation of “chastity,” “modesty,” “purity”; figuratively, “virginity,” which is intended here. Manto is aware of the inherent contradiction of the compound noun “*‘iṣmat-farōshī*” and deals with it later on in this piece. — *Tr.*

as prostitution is commonly designated as “virtue-selling,” we will also use this appellation.

Throughout the ages a prostitute has been considered the most shameful of creatures. But have we ever given a thought to the fact that it is this same degraded individual whose doors we often knock at. Don't we ever think that this makes us equally shameful creatures?

Regrettably, men never give it a moment's thought. They will always attribute every last stain on their own good names to the darkness that fills the heart of the prostitute. The reality, though, is the exact opposite. Prostitute or not, ninety-nine percent of women without their virtue are likely to have, in spite of their ungodly trade, much more radiant hearts than those of dissolute men. Whether a prostitute or a woman with her virtue well preserved, she has always taken a back seat to men, because men control the present system and are free to think of her as they will.

How often have we not heard of a rich profligate, having burned his last penny himself in the crucible of his flaming passion, blaming such-and-such slut or courtesan for his ruination? This is mind-boggling. I wish someone would unravel this mystery for me.

A *fille de joie*, who runs her sex business strictly according to the rules of her profession, will, inevitably, attempt to extract the maximum possible cash from everyone who comes to her as a customer. Now, whether she sells her commodity at a reasonable or exceptionally exorbitant price, why moan about it? It is her business after all. A provisions seller does the same ... by adjusting the weight of the item you have come to buy. Some shops charge less, others considerably more.

The discombobulating point is this: We hear all the time that prostitutes are veritable snakes, with no remedy for their bite. Why do we then willingly allow ourselves to be bitten by them and then fuss over it? A prostitute does not pillage a man's wealth consciously or out of some feeling of revenge. She strikes a deal and earns her living. Men pay her for their sexual gratification. That's all.

It is possible that a prostitute might sometimes love a man. But everyone who crosses her threshold with a specific purpose in mind and then begins to entertain the notion that she should also love him truly—how can that be possible? We go to buy a rupee's worth of flour, now wouldn't it be ridiculous if we started expecting that the shopkeeper should invite us to his home and offer us some surefire cure for baldness?

A man who demands love from a prostitute merely forces her to fake a posture of true love. This will make her customer happy. But she cannot feel within the depths of her heart any stirrings of pure love for every man who gets drunk and starts swaying his head at her *kotba* full of the desire

to induct her into a world of glamorous romance.

One only looks at a prostitute from the outside. Her comportment, her airs, her gorgeous outfit, the décor, the furnishings of her parlor—all this creates the impression of her being well situated and affluent. Nothing can be farther from truth. It does not take exceptional intelligence to appreciate the true situation of a woman whose doors are open for anyone with cash in his pockets—it being of no consequence whether he is a cobbler, a sweeper, lame or disabled, or whether he has good looks or is repulsive. An ugly man, blowing stinking puffs of breath from a mouth wasted by periodontitis comes to her place because he has enough dough to buy the use of her body for a specific period of time. Even if she finds him utterly revolting, she can't turn him away. So she holds back her revulsion and entertains him, putting up with his ugliness, his fetid breath. She is smart enough to know that not all of her clients will be the living image of Apollo.

Nobody gawks at a female typist with consternation, or at midwives with hatred, or at sweeper women with baskets of refuse on their heads with belittlement. But, strangely, women who sell their bodies, whether in a delicate or crude manner, are looked upon with all three: consternation, hatred, and belittlement.

Gentlemen, prostitution is indispensable. You see gorgeous, ritzy cars in the street—don't you? Such classy vehicles aren't meant to transport garbage. Dump trucks exist for that purpose, but you see them less often. And when you do see them, you quickly cover your nose. Well, just as we can't do without dump trucks, neither can we do without prostitutes. They are absolutely necessary. They carry away our dirt, our filth. Had they not existed, our streets and pathways would have been filled with the most unseemly, the most vulgar acts of men.

These women are like dreary, desolate gardens, like open sewers running by garbage piles. They live in the middle of this filth. How can everyone live a lush and exuberant life?

Just think about it: tucked away in a corner of the city is the quarter of a woman who sells her flesh; in the darkness of the evening, a man with a heart even darker than the night, barges in to assuage the leaping flames of his passion. She knows how evil this man is, that his very existence is a danger to humanity's peace, over which it blazes like an ugly stain. She knows he is a frightening specimen of a creature from the age of barbarity, but she cannot slam the door shut in his face—can she? The door that one is compelled to open out of sheer economic necessity and want simply can't be shut without the greatest difficulty.

This woman—a bawd first, a woman second—gives her body over to

a man in exchange for a few coins, but it is a body bereft of her soul in those moments. Listen to what one such bawd has to say:

Men take me out into the fields. I just lie there, immobile, without a sound—dead inert, only my eyes are open, gazing far, far into the distance, where some she-goats are going at one another under the shade of the trees. Oh, what an idyllic scene! I start counting the she-goats, or the ravens on the branches—nineteen, twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two ... Meanwhile the man is finished, withdrawn, and is panting heavily some distance from me. But I'm not aware of any of this.

Observation tells us that *vaishiyas* (prostitutes) tend to be generally God-fearing. At every Hindu *vaishiya's* place you will invariably find small idols or, at the very least, a picture of Krishan Bhagwan or Ganesh Maharaj in one room or another. She worships it with the same reverence and purity of heart as any virtuous domestic woman would. Likewise, if she happens to be Muslim, she will fast unflinchingly during the month of Ramazan, close her business and wear black for the duration of Muharram, help the needy, and, on special occasions, bow to God in utmost humility and submission.

On the face of it, such an attachment by prostitutes to religion might look like just a put on. No, it portrays, in fact, that there is a part of their soul which they have kept well protected from the corrosive effects of society.

This holds equally true for prostitutes of other faiths. You will find them as devoted to their religion as any. A Christian *vaishiya* will not fail to attend mass in church or light an earthen oil-lamp before the picture of the Virgin Mary. In this commerce of the flesh, a *vaishiya* bargains for her body, not for her soul. It is not necessary for a seller of charas and bhang to be addicted to these substances himself. By the same token, not every pandit or maulvi is pious as a rule.

The body can be stained, not the soul.

What with her gloomy business, a prostitute can have a radiant soul. She can be merciless in collecting her wages, but she can also help numberless poor. Her richest clients may not succeed in winning her love, but she wouldn't think twice about giving it to a drifter who only has the sidewalks to sleep on at night.

Yes, she craves money. But does that mean she cannot crave love?

The answer to this question calls for a detailed discussion. There is a big difference between an hereditary prostitute and one who is new to the profession. Then there are also those women or girls who are driven to sell their flesh to support their poor parents or to take care of their fatherless children, but their case is entirely different than the two main types mentioned above.

An hereditary prostitute is one who is born to a prostitute and grows up in her household, in other words, a woman who is instructed in the ways of prostitution according to certain principles required by her occupation. Women who grow up in such an environment generally consider love a coin that has no value in their trade. This makes sense; for if they were to give their hearts away to every client who visits them for a few hours, they wouldn't be able to run their business successfully.

Such women, as commonly observed, rarely feel the stirrings of love in their hearts. Said differently, in comparison to other women, they are very circumspect. Indeed, they can be quite stingy about falling in love. Their interaction with men generates indescribable feelings of bitterness in their hearts for men, whom they begin to consider worse than animals. That's why they become, to a degree, "disbelievers" in love. Which, of course, doesn't mean that their hearts are entirely bereft of the delicate, tender feelings of love.

Just as a sweeper's girl would feel no revulsion carrying her first basket of filth on her head, in like manner prostitutes also would feel no hesitation or shame at their debut in the profession. Bashfulness, hesitation, and their complementary sentiments will gradually wear off to the point of nonexistence. How can tender feelings of love find their way into the hearts of prostitutes whose doors are open for lustful men?

Just as decent, virtuous women gaze at *vaishiyas* with bafflement and shocked disbelief, so do the latter gaze at the former. While the eyes of virtuous women are filled with the question, "Could a woman sink so low?" the virtue-less woman thinks, rather, "What are these chaste women? Who are they?"

A *vaishiya* whose mother was a *vaishiya*, whose grandmother was a *vaishiya*, and so on, who has been suckled at a *vaishiya's* breasts, who was born smack in the midst of the oldest profession, grew up in its milieu, and started selling her flesh there—how can she ever understand virtue or virtuous women?

Out of every one hundred girls born into prostitutes' families, perhaps only one or two ever feel revulsion at their environment and firmly commit to surrender themselves only to one man. The rest follow the path of their mothers.

A shopkeeper's son desires to open his own shop and expresses this desire in a variety of ways. It is no different with the teenage girls of prostitutes. They also long to set up their own business, which is what leads them to display the attributes of their bodies, their charms, their beauty in ever-newer, eye-catching ways. And when they launch into the business, it follows the enactment of specific initiation ceremonies. This is no different

than the protocol for launching any new business.

This being the case, obviously, it is hard for love to sprout in the hearts of these hereditary prostitutes. By love, I mean the kind that is prevalent in our society from long ago—the proverbial love of Heer and Ranjha, Sassi and Punnu.

But these seasoned, hardened prostitutes also love, though in a radically different way. They can't replicate the love of Laila and Majnun or Heer and Ranjha for the all too obvious adverse effect it would certainly have on their business. If a *vaishya* were to set apart a few moments during her work hours for a man from whom she doesn't care to receive money, well, we would say that she has feelings for this fellow. But as a rule, she is greedy only for a man's wealth. She would be breaking a rule if she cared for him and not his money, and would also be making it obvious that her heart is at work behind this care, not any desire to cash in on his riches. And where the heart is involved, feelings of love must inevitably find their way.

Ordinarily, love springs from the unalloyed desire for sexual gratification. So, here too, we will consider it the operative agent of what is called love. But many other considerations can also set love in motion. For instance, a woman who sells sex for money and is used to lording it over men, might also tire of being endlessly wheedled and indulged in her whims by her clients. Yes, she likes to be the boss, but there are times when she would like nothing better than being subservient herself. Surely, fulfillment of every request is hugely profitable, but rejection, too, has a flavor all its own. Raking in piles of money as a routine inevitably makes her want, sometimes, to spend it on someone else. If everyone plays up to her, she too might want to flatter someone. If she is adamant with someone, someone must also be adamant with her. She always spurns and snubs others, someone should also snub her, tease her, treat her badly. All these latent desires compel her to choose a particular man for herself. And so she chooses.

Selection is an exceedingly delicate, indeed quite an unpredictable matter. It is entirely conceivable that she might open the portals of her heart to the scion of some rich man, or end up throwing herself at the feet of the filthy, charas-addicted *mirasi* who fills the huqqa-bowls at her *kotha*—she, for a kiss of whose curls distinguished kings and princes have showered thousands of gold pieces without thinking twice. Nor should we feel surprise when that filthy man kicks her away with contempt. One often observes and hears about such incidents.

A famous *tawaif* is still alive in our time whom a nawab sahib had been madly in love with for a long time, while she had given her heart to a very

ordinary man. She would ridicule the nawab's love, while people derided her for hers. The nawab earned disgrace for loving a *tawaif*, and she lost esteem in the eyes of the people for loving a nobody.

A *vaishiya's* love, compared to that of ordinary women, is more intense. Her association with men introduces her to unfamiliar emotions of loving, and when she herself falls in love, those emotions affect her with greater force.

Such stories abound in bazaars where prostitutes conduct their business, especially stories about the pleasure-loving, filthy rich whose bags of money open up at prostitutes' *kothas*. And there are those who love to tell those stories with great zeal. Sarangi-players, drummers, and others who regularly come and go at *kothas* will tell you many such spicy tales.

Among those stories, we can cite by way of example the one about a particular prostitute who literally bathed in tons of money, but her heart was lost to a laborer in tatters and she was trampled mercilessly under his calloused feet every day. She collected piles of money from her admirers every night, but remained miles away from the grimy embrace of the laborer. She hopelessly failed to find her way into his heart. How often did she not, with a body as delicate as a flower, sleep on the bare cobblestone sidewalk to win the affection of her laborer!

Such paradox, the color of true love, does appear quite outlandish and mysteriously romantic in the milieu of brothels. But it is the backdrop that accentuates and highlights the objects that occupy the foreground. Since we normally think that all a prostitute ever cares about is money, that she is altogether bereft of feelings of love, a story such as the above always seems incredible and bizarre; hence, our heightened interest in listening to it—far more than listening to the love affairs of ordinary men and women—as if it was an account of something highly improbable, although, in point of fact, the heart and its stirrings have nothing to do with the selling of one's virtue or keeping it unstained. A virtuous woman can have a heart that does not throb for love; conversely, the meanest bawd of a bordello can possess a heart fully responsive to such promptings.

One should never forget that not every woman is a *vaishiya*, but that every *vaishiya* is a woman.

There's something special about a *vaishiya's* love that is worth mentioning. It is that her love never gets in the way of her business. One rarely finds a *vaishiya* who permanently folded up her business for the sake of her love (any more than a respectable shopkeeper closes down his business because of his love for an honorable girl). Normally, a *vaishiya* will continue her business even though she loves someone. One could say that a businessman's appetite for money becomes part of her psyche. Making

new customers and selling her flesh turns into something like a habit, which eventually becomes her nature, with absolutely no effect on other areas of her life. Just as a servant, after speedily making his master's bed, turns to his own comfort, in like manner, these women return to their own happiness and comfort just as soon as they have entertained the last customer of the evening.

The heart is not something one can portion off, and women tend to be comparatively less promiscuous than men. Inasmuch as a *vaishbiya* is a woman, she can't give her heart to all of her clients. A woman loves only one man in her life, or so the saying goes. I tend to think that this is largely true. She will open her heart only to the man for whom she feels love; she can't give it to everyone who crosses her threshold.

How often is the complaint not heard that prostitutes are generally very cruel and tyrannical. Perhaps the thinnest sliver in a population of hundreds can be characterized this way, but not all; they cannot be. One must never compare a prostitute to a woman who preserves her modesty. Indeed such a comparison is grossly misleading. A *vaishbiya* works for her living; the modest woman has many to provide for her needs.

The words of a *vaishbiya*, which reflect the depths of her feelings, are still echoing in my ears. Listen:

A *vaishbiya* is a helpless woman with no one to watch over her. A whole host of men visit her every evening—for only one purpose. She feels alone even in the company of her lovers—all alone. She is a train that travels in the darkness of night, drops off her passengers at their destinations, and then stands empty under the metal roof of a shed—all alone, abandoned, forlorn, covered with dust and smoke. People call us bad. Heaven only knows why? The very clients who buy us for their comfort in the darkness of night, disparage, belittle and hate us in the light of day. We sell our bodies openly; we don't hide it as a secret. Men come to us to buy sex, and then keep this transaction a secret ... one wonders why?

Think of the prostitute who has no one in the world to call her own—no brother, no sister, no parents, not even a friend. When the last customer of the evening has gone away, she is left all alone in her room. Try to imagine the state of her mind and heart then—a void made a hundredfold more frightening than the darkness of her night.

Imagine the condition of a porter who has no means to relax after a day's grueling work, no wife to talk with to amuse himself, nor a mother who would put an affectionate hand gently on his shoulder to take away all his misery, soak up all his fatigue. Have you any idea what such a laborer must feel like? Materially, a *vaishbiya*'s situation is not much different than his. But why, then, does she look so full of vivacity and exuberance?

For the answer we must dig deep into our hearts. The fault lies in the way we look at a prostitute; hence, we must commune with our inner self in order to discover the reasons for our shortsightedness. What I have been able to work out, after much hard thinking, is this:

The minute the word *vaishiya* is uttered, a female image sails before our eyes—a female who can gratify a man's desire for sex in whatever manner and whenever he feels the need for it. But we forget that a prostitute and a woman are two different entities, so when we think about the former, what we inevitably see is a woman and her profession rolled into one. Now it's true that one's profession and milieu do considerably affect a person, but there are times when this person is simply a human being, apart from whatever else she may be. Likewise, there can be times when a *vaishiya* has shed the accouterments of her calling and becomes just a woman. But alas, we are used to only looking at her and her profession as one and the same thing. Thus we see her as a woman and as one who gives pleasure, the pleasure being ordinarily pure sexual gratification.

What is sexual pleasure?

It is that ephemeral physical pleasure, lasting barely a few moments, which comes from joining together with one's wife or with any other woman. Why, then, does a married man chuck his wife and go off to a prostitute to get it? Why does he knock about everywhere outside when this desire can be satisfied just as easily inside his home?

The answer is fairly simple. You must have seen numberless people who dine in restaurants when they can eat more sumptuous and savory dishes at home. This is because they become addicted to restaurant food. Surely it is less nourishing, but it has something which attracts them immensely. We might call this something "the peculiar ambience of the restaurant"—admittedly a vice which becomes a virtue, in other words, an attraction—a fabricated attraction in which the restaurateur plays no small part.

Additionally, the exuberance, the gaiety of the restaurant is not something he can replicate at home. By nature man likes variety. His desire for a change in his daily routine need not surprise us. Surely the restaurant diet is not as good and healthy as homemade food, and far more expensive to boot. But this is what these people love, what drags them to a restaurant. Call it folly or stupidity if you will, but they like it.

The case of married men who seek pleasure in the embrace of a prostitute is no different. Do they succeed in finding it?—you might ask. Certainly, I would say. The women they visit are adept at providing maximum gratification. After all, this is what they sell; it is their profession—to give a pleasure all its own, utterly different from what a housewife can provide. How else would their business flourish?

Let me reiterate what I said at the beginning of this piece: prostitution is not at all irrational. □

—*Edited and translated by Muhammad Umar Memon*