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## Short Story Writer and Matters of Sex \*

REGARDLESS OF HOW INSIGNIFICANT A THING, it never fails to create problems. A mosquito finds its way inside a mosquito net and stirs up a whole host of problems: how to expel the offender, what proper safeguards would prevent this culprit and other offenders of its ilk from getting inside the netting ever again. However, the biggest problem, the granddaddy of problems, came about in the world when Adam felt the pangs of hunger. A somewhat less pressing, nonetheless interesting, problem surfaced when the first man on earth encountered the first woman on earth.

Both problems, as you well know, are basically two kinds of hunger. They are intimately connected—precisely why we see them at work in back of all of our contemporary problems, be they societal, social, political or military.

But hunger, never mind what kind it is, is an extremely dangerous thing. If only chains are always offered to those who hanker after freedom, revolution will inevitably occur. If the starving are kept fasting day after day, desperation will drive them to snatch the food from the mouths of others. If man were denied the sight of the female body, he would perhaps look for its image among his own sex and animals.

Hunger is the font of every conceivable ill. It sends you out to beg, entices you to commit crimes, to sell your body, and it teaches extremism. Its assault is unforgiving, its blow unfailing, its wound very deep. Hunger breeds madmen; madness doesn't create hunger.

No matter where a writer is situated on planet Earth, whether he is progressive or conservative, young or old, all he sees is a plethora of problems afflicting the world. He picks from them and writes about them—once in favor of a problem, once against some other.

Today's writer is not much different from his counterpart five hundred years ago. It is Time, not man, that tags everything as new or old. Today

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\* "Afsāna-Nigār aur Jinsī Masā'il," from the author's collection *Manṭōnāma* (Lahore: Saṅg-e Mīl Publications, 1990), 684–87.

we are called “new” writers. Tomorrow we will be labeled “old” and put away in some cupboard. This doesn't mean we lived for nothing, that our lives were a waste, that we toiled for nothing. When a clock's hand crawls to two, it doesn't render the previous digit useless, because the hand goes through its cycle and comes back to one. This is the law that governs a clock, just as it governs the world.

Today's problems are not fundamentally different from those old problems of yesterday. The seeds for all the ills that plague us today were sown yesterday. Likewise, sexual problems that confront us now had also challenged earlier writers. They wrote about them in their own way, and so do we in our own way.

I don't know why I'm so often grilled about the sex in my stories. Could it be because some people consider me a Progressive, or because I've written some stories on sexual themes? Or perhaps because by calling some new writers “sex-crazy” some people want to banish them from literature, religion, and society in a single blow? Whatever the reason, here is how I look at things:

Bread and stomach, man and woman—these are correlations that go back to the beginning of time. Eternal. Which of the two is more important, bread or stomach, woman or man, I can't say anything about it with certainty. Why? Because my stomach demands bread, but does wheat also crave my stomach equally? This I absolutely do not know.

All the same, when the thought drifts through my mind that if the earth has produced wheat it couldn't be without a purpose—which suggests to me that all those golden shafts of wheat swaying in the vast, open fields are meant just for my stomach. Immediately another thought comes sailing in: perhaps my stomach came first, the ears of wheat some time later.

Whatever. It is as evident as daylight that all of world literature is the product of just these two relationships. Even revelations, a kind of heavenly literature, don't fail to touch on bread and stomach, man and woman.

The question arises: if these issues are so primeval that even sacred books mention them, why are contemporary writers still harping on them? Why is the relationship between woman and man never let go of and, as someone has said, obscenity bruited about. The answer is simple. If the world could give up lying and thieving through a single act of exhortation, just one Prophet would have sufficed, but, as you know, the list is rather long.

We writers are not prophets. We look at problems from different perspectives in different circumstances and present them according to what and how we perceive them. But we never foist anything upon anyone.

We're not lawgivers, not even inquisitors. Framing laws and keeping

track of people's morals is for others. Surely, we take government to task, but never aspire to become rulers ourselves. Surely, we draft plans for buildings, but we aren't builders. We diagnose ailments, but don't run hospitals.

We don't write about sex per se. If anyone thinks otherwise, they are mistaken. Rather, we write about the circumstances of particular men and women. If a husband hates his wife for her simplicity and her preference for white clothing in our story, other women should not take it as an incontrovertible norm. However, if you want to know what circumstances caused this hate and why, you will definitely find the answer there.

Those who read our stories to find ways to titillate their senses, they will certainly be disappointed. We are not wrestlers who can teach you surefire holds and maneuvers to knock down your opponent. But if we see someone flat on his back in the arena, we can speculate and explain to you what might have caused his defeat.

We are optimists who never fail to see a silver lining in the darkest cloud. If a prostitute expels the paan spittle from her mouth and aims it at the passerby under her balcony, we neither laugh at the passerby nor curse the whore up and down. We just pause, let our gaze tear through her revealing clothes down to her dark, sinful body and penetrate straight into her heart to grope around inside, morphing, in our imagination, into that selfsame filthy, revolting whore, and strive to describe not just the incident in all its vivid detail, but also to find its true motivation.

If a beautiful, healthy young girl from a respectable family runs away with an ugly, scrawny, penniless young man, we don't call her a wretch. Surely others will drag her past, her present, and her future before a moral tribunal. Conversely, we will do nothing of the sort; we will instead try to undo the tiny knot that had numbed her sense of judgment.

Humans are not very different from one another. One person can commit the same mistake another has. If one woman can open shop in the bazaar to sell her body, so can every other woman. Man is not culpable, it is his circumstances that are—circumstances that lead him to commit his mistakes and live through their consequences. □

—*Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon*