

SA‘ADAT HASAN MANTO

How I Write Stories*

HONORABLE LADIES AND GENTLEMEN!

I’ve been asked to explain how I write stories.

This “how” is problematic. What can I tell you about how I write stories? It is a very convoluted matter. With this “how” before me I could say I sit on the sofa in my room, take out paper and pen, utter *bismillab*, and start writing, while all three of my daughters keep making a lot of noise around me. I talk to them as I write, settle their quarrels, make salad for myself, and, if someone drops by for a visit, I show him hospitality. During all this, I don’t stop writing my story.

If I must answer how I write, I would say my manner of writing is no different from my manner of eating, taking a bath, smoking cigarettes, or wasting time.

Now, if one asked why I write short stories, well, I have an answer for that. Here it goes:

I write because I’m addicted to writing, just as I’m addicted to wine. For if I don’t write a story, I feel as if I’m not wearing any clothes, I haven’t bathed, or I haven’t had my wine.

The fact is, I don’t write stories; stories write me. I’m a man of modest education. And although I have written more than twenty books, there are times when I wonder about this one who has written such fine stories—stories that frequently land me in the courts of law.

Minus my pen, I’m merely Saadat Hasan, who knows neither Urdu, nor Persian, English or French.

Stories don’t reside in my mind; they reside in my pocket, totally unbeknownst to me. Try as hard as I might to strain my mind hoping for some story to pop out, trying equally hard to be a short story writer, smoke cigarette after cigarette, but my mind fails to produce a story. Exhausted, I lie down like a woman who cannot conceive a baby.

*“Maiñ Afsāna Kyuñkar Likhtā Hūñ,” from the author’s collection *Ūpar, Ničē, aur Darmiyān* (Lahore: Gōsha-e Adab, 1990), 237–40.

As I've already collected the remuneration in advance for a promised but still unwritten story, I feel quite vexed. I keep turning over restlessly in bed, get up to feed my birds, push my daughters on their swing, collect trash from the house, pick up little shoes scattered throughout the house and put them neatly in one place—but the blasted short story taking it easy in my pocket refuses to travel to my mind, which makes me feel very edgy and agitated.

When my agitation peaks, I dash to the toilet. That doesn't help either. It is said that every great man does all his thinking in the toilet. Experience has convinced me that I'm no great man, because I can't think even inside a toilet. Still, I'm a great short story writer of Pakistan and Hindustan—amazing, isn't it?

Well, all I can say is that either my critics have a grossly inflated opinion of me, or else I'm blinding them in the clear light of day, or casting a spell over them.

Forgive me, I went to the toilet The plain fact is, and I say this in the presence of my Lord, I haven't the foggiest idea how I write stories.

Often when my wife finds me feeling totally defeated and out of my wits, she says, "Don't think, just pick up your pen and start writing."

So advised by her I pick up my pen and start writing, with my mind totally blank but my pocket crammed full of stories. All of a sudden a story pops out on its own.

This being the case, I'm forced to think of myself as not so much a writer of stories but more as a pickpocket who picks his own pocket and then hands over its contents to you. You can travel the whole world but you won't find a greater idiot than me. □

—*Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon*