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Recounting Irregular Verbs and Counting She-Goats

SAADAT HASAN MANTO'S NONFICTIONAL PIECE "Iṣmat-Farōshī" (selling of virtue: prostitution) (1966) is an impassioned defense of women who practice the oldest profession. He goes into great detail arguing vigorously for prostitution's similarity to every other profession; hence, deserving of respect. We do not look down on a typist, or even a sweeper woman, why should we ride roughshod over a bawd? All three do what they do in order to earn a living.

No exceptional intelligence is required to detect in back of this almost pathological engagement with prostitutes, Manṭō's defense of himself against frequent charges of obscenity. (I say pathological for good reason: Manṭō not only wrote a goodly number of stories in which the *vēshiyā* occupies center stage, he also revisited her in quite a few of his articles, as if he was obsessed with, indeed fixated on this much maligned being.) The Karachi judge Mehdī 'Alī Ṣiddīqī, in whose court Manṭō was tried for "Ūpar, Nīčē, aur Darmiyān" (upper, lower, and middle), considered him "the greatest Urdu short story writer after Munshi Premchand" (1982, 185) but nevertheless fined him twenty-five rupees for the offence, which raised Manṭō's dander. Later, in a friendly meeting, Manṭō asked the judge how the fine squared with "greatest writer, etc." The judge replied that he would give him the reason at some later time. And he did. By then Manṭō was six feet below the ground, perhaps being repeatedly grilled by the inquisitors Munkar and Nakeer of the Divine Supreme Court.

Where Ghulām 'Abbās could get away by writing his masterly suggestive "Ānandī" without stepping on the toes of the ever-vigilant law, Manṭō was dragged to the court on a charge of obscenity for a number of his stories. But, even if one subjected Manṭō's so-called "obscene" stories to the harshest scrutiny, one would come away terribly disappointed, unable to find anything remotely smutty. (In Judge Ṣiddīqī's words, "He hadn't used a single obscene word in the story ["Ūpar, Nīčē, aur Darmiyān"],

which is absolutely true” (*ibid.*, 187)). Such stories do not dwell on the sex act and its titillating details, but simply use lovemaking to underscore some aspect of the character’s mind and personality. Not a whiff of a desire to excite or inflame the reader’s passion is noticeable in the Manṭō stories characterized as obscene. Take, for instance, “Ṭhandā Gōsht” (literally, cold meat). The language of the back-and-forth between Kalwant Kaur and Eshar Singh might appear to contradict what I have said, but only if the end of the story is thrown overboard. However, the power of the story’s denouement, which does not derive from sex, breaks upon the reader’s senses with such overwhelming force that he can’t even think of anything else. It is the very idea of promiscuity—that raises the hackles of “righteous” people. And the relations of the lawfully married, though they can be as stormy and gratifying as anything with a prostitute—are not something you talk about. You just do it, in the privacy of your bedroom, or wherever else its indomitable force overtakes you. Chances are, God will even reward you for it. (Marry and be fruitful, something like that—remember?)

While a goodly number visited prostitutes, and no power was ever able to root out this “vice” from society, words such as *ṭavā’if*, *vēshiyā*, *kasbī*, *randī*, *rakhēl* and what have you, were taboo in polite society. Now, it was a different matter if in a different city while on a debating contest tour, students of the team didn’t fail to scout out its red-light district.

Manṭō’s problem, if it was a problem at all, was his straight thinking, and even more, his straight-talking. He didn’t care about such taboos. If people made love, then there was nothing wrong in talking about making love, especially when the subject of his stories was not the act but what lay behind the act in the protagonist’s psyche. According to the aforementioned judge, “[Manṭō] told me that the story in question was to a large extent based on real events. So if it was obscene, there was little he could do about it. Contemporary society was itself obscene. He merely portrays what he sees ...” (*ibid.*, 187). Which made the judge conclude, “Precisely at that moment the realization hit me in all its intensity that this man was a true artist. Manṭō didn’t have the foggiest idea that he had written anything obscene; he had merely written a short story” (*ibid.*, 186).

A few years ago I read Tahar Ben Jelloun’s novel *Corruption*. The subject of this fictional piece is familiar to South Asians, who daily witness the myriad forms of this abominable practice in their national life. The novel contains numerous graphic descriptions of the love life of a lawfully wedded couple. Here is a tasty morsel from the life of a lawfully wedded couple:

Was it love? My shyness, my hang-ups, and my seriousness were handicaps to knowing the truth. Now, I know that I desired her physically. At the be-

ginning of our marriage we spent a lot of time making love. What was surprising was that she went wild in bed. She made love with her entire body. One day, from underneath the bed, she pulled out the book of Sheikh Nafzaouvi, a manual of Muslim erotology, and decided that for one month we were going to execute every position described by the sheikh, twenty-nine in all. It was funny: we made love with a manual in front of us. She knew this book by heart and recited entire passages to me. I memorized a few names of positions I found comical, like “black-smith’s copulation,” “the camel’s hump,” “Archimedes’ vice,” and so on. Why the black-smith? At a certain moment, while the woman is on her back, “her knees raised toward her chest so that her vulva is exposed, the man executes the movements of copulation, then removes his member and slides it between the woman’s thighs, like the black-smith removing the red-hot iron from the fire ...”

(1995, 10)

Far be it from Manṭō to use such graphic language, or even the language used by Mīr Dard and Mōmin Khān Mōmin in their *maṣnavīs*, which Manṭō has cited elsewhere (1991, 732–42) as telling specimens of what is called “obscurity.” But even in *Corruption*, this minor detail, like so many others, is simply a part of the protagonist’s life and contributes its share in weaving the multicolored tapestry of his personality—a simple, upright man who would not accept a bribe, in any form or fashion, because such practices went against his conscience, his innate sense of morality. By the time we finish the novel, the miniscule details of his married life are entirely forgotten, submerged, as it were, in the trials and tribulations which Mourad, a decent, honest man, must go through in order to live a decent, honest life. Then again, reference to conjugal intimacy is not thrown into the novel merely willfully, or for titillation. Mourad has come to doubt whether it was he who wanted to marry his wife or she who had trapped him using cunning and wile. The doubt has surfaced because she, a competitive, ambitious woman, pining to live a luxurious life and keep up with the Joneses, never failed to hold him responsible for their modest style of living, insinuating in so many ways that he ought to adopt the ways of the world, of his colleagues—i.e., start accepting bribes.

Which, of course, is not the case with ‘Azīz Aḥmad’s short story “Paḡ-ḡanḡī (foot trail), where it is hard to see Āzād, the protagonist who is studying in Paris, as anything other than a sex maniac, forever chasing after girls. Although in his later years ‘Azīz Aḥmad did quite a bit to redeem himself by writing on Muslim intellectual history, it is hard to miss an undercurrent of sexuality qua sexuality in some of his earlier fictional work. Anyway, faking love, Āzād finally gets what he wanted. He takes Yvonne for an outing to a small village on the banks of the Seine, some twenty miles from Paris. As they are walking on a foot trail, Yvonne censures him for

being an incorrigible materialist.

“Revolutionaries are materialists too,” he said and kissed her again. This time she melted completely. He thought that perhaps no one had kissed her so passionately before, no one had taken such liberties with her body. He knew that at this moment her mind was completely incapable of dealing with the complexities of revolution, materialism, communism, love, and emotions. What was evident, though, was that her warm, young flesh was trembling with excitement. He didn’t let the opportunity slip. He lifted her in his arms, quickly found a spot in the thicket, gently laid her down and started to unbutton her pale yellow jacket. He caressed her breasts, which resembled pink blossoms among the lush green trees. Then he covered her whole body with his like a stretch of cloud spreading itself over a clump of flourishing trees.

Later, when he helped her get up from the bed of grass he felt a strange feeling of satisfaction wash over him. This girl was not a virgin, and he was not the first man in her life. Some other comrade, some other revolutionary and materialist had kissed her before, taken liberties with her body and accepted her virginity as a tribute.

(2010, 202)

Lyricism aside, “comrade,” “revolutionary,” “materialism,” “communism” —the familiar Progressive jargon is all here, and serves no useful purpose, except *samān-bandī* (atmospherics), if that can be a purpose. The purpose is to use Yvonne for his own pleasure. The story doesn’t move beyond lovemaking, minus the love. Yvonne, too, is a terribly immature, indecisive, naïve, and confused girl, with no ability to fathom the impulses of her body. Then again, perhaps she is none of these and this is only how the narrator chooses to see her; after all, he too is an Indian. The story tells us precious little about this self-conceited, self-obsessed protagonist. What it does tell us, though, is something we can well do without, for if we reflect a bit more, a none-too-wholesome window will burst open to reveal the preoccupations of a flamboyant scion blowing his parents’ money in Europe not on study but on “skirt-chasing.” The only image of the protagonist that is formed in our minds after we are finished reading the story is that of a young Indian man desperately trying to bed down with a white European woman, after the belief, rampant among the élite of the Indian subcontinent back in pre-Partition days (and maybe even now), that European women are promiscuous and easy to get. Now, this is what Manṭō would unhesitatingly call “obscene.”

After this brief excursus, here interposed to explain Manṭō’s preoccupation with sex providers, I cite a delightfully revealing passage from the article “Ismat-Faroshi.”

This woman—a bawd first, a woman second—gives her body over to the man in lieu of a few coins, but a body bereft of her soul in those moments. Listen to what one such woman 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.”

(1966, 160)

This reminds me of the scene from Milan Kundera’s novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, where Tamina has surrendered her body to this “nice guy” Hugo, not because she is after sex, but because he has promised to bring back to her the diaries she left behind in Prague when she and her now dead husband had escaped from Czechoslovakia. They contain her memories of their life together, all those yearly vacations they took. “But when she was fully naked, Hugo [...] was stupefied to discover that Tamina’s genitals were dry” (1984, 108). Nevertheless when he goes into action, Tamina

quickly shut her eyes. Once again she began going through the vacations, like irregular verbs: first the vacation at the lake, then Yugoslavia, the lake, and the spa—or was it the spa, Yugoslavia, and the lake?—then the Tatras, then Bulgaria, then things got hazy, then Prague, the spa, and finally Italy.

(*ibid.*, 110–11)

Why has Tamina succumbed to Hugo—Tamina, who loved her husband dearly, and is described by the narrator touchingly as: “I picture the world growing up around Tamina like a circular wall, and I picture her as a small patch of grass down below. The only rose growing on that patch of grass is the memory of her husband” (*ibid.*, 83).

Doesn’t this sound like a cruel paradox?

All seven parts of Kundera’s novel defy our conventional notions about the form of the novel, as they are held together polyphonically by two dominant themes, “laughter” and “forgetting,” returning to them in umpteen variations. Eroticism, though liberally spattered, is not a dominant theme of this novel, but, as Kundera explained to Philip Roth, “I have the feeling that a scene of physical love generates an extremely sharp light which suddenly reveals the essence of characters and sums up their life situation” (*ibid.*, 236).

So what we have in “Iṣmat-Farōshī” and *Laughter and Forgetting* are experiences of two different women: one a prostitute, the other a married

but widowed woman. What is common between the two experiences is the subjects' total state of apathy during lovemaking. Even as they go through the motions—because the livelihood of one depends on it, while the other sees no other way to get hold of her diaries so redolent with the memory of her dead husband—each denies herself any pleasure from the act by subtly turning off her sense of touch, her ability to feel and reciprocate, in what one might describe as a self-induced, semi-comatose state. Instead, each subverts the whole meaning of the act, one by counting she-goats, the other by going through all those many vacations taken with a husband who is no more.

In short, neither heart nor soul is involved in the act being performed on their bodies. On his first diplomatic assignment in Rangoon (Burma), Pablo Neruda, according to the reconstructed fictionalized biography of the poet by Roberto Ampuero, used to round up a bunch of whores for something like an orgy. The whores went wild with sexual pleasure inside the undulating mosquito net, but the poet was never sure about their response and found it terribly frustrating. “It sounds exciting,” the poet said, but in truth it's not so much in the end. I only entered their bodies, never their souls. Understand? I always succumbed like an exhausted castaway before the unconquerable walls of those graceful, mysterious women” (2012, 51). In other words, the soul was missing, with the noticeable difference that while the Burmese whores seemed to enjoy what they were doing, Maṅṭō's *vēshiyā* and Kundera's Tamina did not.

Paradoxically, but no less poignantly, it is “love” that has determined their identical response of apathy, their sensual paralysis. For one it is a love longed for, shimmering somewhere in some hopefully not-too-distant future when the right man will come her way; for the other, it is a love which circumstances have chosen to snatch away from her. It is not as though the ability to love, and to enjoy lovemaking with a man she loves, never existed. Tamina knows that the demands of her flesh will make it impossible to go on without a mate, whom she may grow to love some day. The *vēshiyā* also knows that she will find a man with whom what she now does for a living will assume a different meaning, an utterly satisfying flavor.

I see Maṅṭō in the court, in all his disarming innocence and perplexity, asking the judge: “Your Honor, where is there any obscenity in all this?” □

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