DANIELA BREDI

Fallen Women: A Comparison of Rusva and Manto

So-called "fallen women" are a literary subject that seems to have attracted many writers in every age. One need only think of the poems of Pietro Aretino and Antonio Baffo in Italian literature, of Guy de Maupassant's stories and Zola's novels in French, and, in Urdu literature, of Naẓīr Akbarābādī's *Parī kā Sarāpā*, of the famous novel by Rusvā, *Umrā'ō Jān Adā*, and the short stories of Manṭō. It seems worthwhile to pause for a moment specifically on these last two authors, as the works of theirs which deal with this subject are not only artistically successful, but lend themselves to being adopted as sources for the social history of their respective eras. Manṭō, whose theory of literature approaches but does not coincide with that of the Progressive Writers Movement, is particularly attentive to the social reality of the marginal figure, and unusually sensitive to the female situation[1] in an age which marks the transition between the colonial period and Independence. Rusvā, whose theory of literature approaches but does not coincide with that of the other first writers of the Urdu novel—Sarshār, Nażīr Aḥmad, Sharar—culls, in his masterpiece, the essence of the transition from the *navāb* era to British domination, narrating the changing fortunes of a courtesan, whose position in society makes her an ideal witness to her own time.[2]

Veena Talwar Oldenburg, in her fine article on the courtesans of Lucknow, begins by expressing her surprise at finding common prostitutes in the lists of contributors to Lucknow's taxes from 1858 to 1877, and

---

[1]Sukrita Paul Kumar, "Surfacing from Within: Fallen Women in Manto's Fiction," *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, No. 11 (1996), p. 155–62.

[2]Ralph Russell, *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 106–7.

considers this a British innovation.[3] The author, however, forgets that it was not the English who invented the taxes on prostitution. In fact, as far as the Muslim world is concerned (which Lucknow should be considered a part of until the arrival of the British) such a practice is documented from at least the Abbasid period, when the minister ‘Adud al-Dawla (936-983) created a brothel in Baghdad to support the city's finances.[4] Centuries later an anonymous Venetian traveler of 1514 notes that at Isfahan, then the capital of Safavid Iran, the 14,000 prostitutes registered in the *baitu 'l-luṭf* had to pay taxes graduated according to their beauty.[5] Perhaps during the Awadh rule things went differently, or perhaps, more simply, the relevant documentation has not survived. The appearance of "singing and dancing girls" in the lists of Lucknow's contributors is nevertheless taken as a sign of the passage between two eras divided by the great watershed of the Mutiny, which irrevocably marked the end of a world in which courtesans had a recognized social role. Not by chance, then, Mirzā Muḥammad Hādī "Rusvā" (whom Annemarie Schimmel describes as "the founder of the realistic novel"[6]) recounts the life of a Lucknow courtesan from about 1840 to 1870 in *Umrā'ō Jān Adā*, the only Urdu novel of the end of the nineteenth century that has an undeniable literary value. He does nothing other than put into action his idea of literature as history,[7] and the protagonist has the role of witness to her age, as appears evident from the couplet that opens the chapter in which her narration begins:

The story of my life or the story of my time—
Which is the story you would like to hear?

Whether the novel is based on a real autobiography or not is of little

---

[3]Veena Talwar Oldenburg, "Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow," in *Lucknow—Memories of a City*, ed. Violette Graf (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 136–37.

[4]Cf. Alberuni, in *Alberuni's India: An Account of the Religion, Philosophy, Literature, Geography, Chronology, Astronomy, Customs, Laws and Astrology of India about AD 1030*, ed. Edward C, Sachau (London, 1910; rpt. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 1998), vol. 2, p. 157.

[5]Giorgio Vercellin, *Tra veli e turbanti* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2000), p. 182.

[6]A. Schimmel, *Classical Urdu Literature from the Beginning to Iqbal* (Wiesbaden, Otto Harrassowitz, 1975), p. 235.

[7]*Żāt-e Sharīf* (Lucknow: Ashrafi Books, n.d. [ca. 1963]), pp. 3–4 (cited in R. Russell, *Pursuit of Urdu Literature*, pp. 106–7).

importance, for the work is perfectly successful both from the esthetic point of view as well as the socio-historical one. What emerges from the narration—as well as from the exchanges between the protagonist and the writer that bridge the various parts—is in fact a lively and interesting slice of life, the reflection of an attitude that is still immune to sentimentalism for the future of the common prostitute, and to doubts about her position in society. The clearest example of this is the episode relating the fight amongst the women in the house of the lawyer with whom Umrā'ō is hiding out during a difficult period of her life. In the lawyer's absence, his wife invites Umrā'ō to join her in the household and, as they are chatting, an old woman arrives who has no reservations about demonstrating clearly her contempt for the courtesan. The quarrel that follows between the wife and the old woman degenerates into a fight and provokes the intervention of the lawyer's mother, who then begins to speak to the servant about her daughter-in-law's behavior, pretending to be completely unaware of Umrā'ō's presence. The old woman is sent away, but the mother-in-law and servant agree in giving the responsibility for the event to the wife, who should not have invited a courtesan into her rooms. In recounting the episode, Umrā'ō cannot but show her own bitterness for the open contempt to which she was subject on that occasion and which still burns her after so many years. Rusvā however does not side with her, nor does he console her. He retorts somewhat dryly retorts that he agrees with the lawyer's mother in blaming the wife, adding that if his own wife had ever invited a courtesan into the house, he would surely have punished her by sending her back to her own family for six months. To Umrā'ō's requests for an explanation he replies:

> "The thing is that there are three kinds of women: the virtuous, the depraved and whores! The second category can be further subdivided: one, women who sin in secret; two, those who do it openly. Among those who are virtuous you find those who would never sully their reputation; they are women who live their whole lives within four walls and put up with all kinds of affliction. Everyone is your friend when times are good, but when they are bad, you find that these poor souls will be the real friends. When their husbands are still young, and there is plenty of money, the women can get out a bit and enjoy themselves. But in times of poverty and old-age, they have no one to bother about them. They put up with hardship, and have to make the best of it. Do they not have good reason to feel proud of this? And that is why they look upon so harshly on the depraved class. God will forgive you if you are sincere in your repentance; these

> women will never forgive. In the case of our homely wife, no matter how beautiful, virtuous or efficient she might be, we often see that their stupid husbands get infatuated with prostitutes, even though the whore may be much less attractive than their own wife. They often abandon their wives for a while, or even permanently. For this reason the simple wife gets an idea, or rather is certain, that the prostitute is using some supernatural force, like the charms and leeches you mentioned, that can affect her husband's mind. That is also a kind of virtue, whereby the husband is regarded as innocent, and the prostitute is given all the blame. What other proof do you require of their love?"[8]

Rusvā here gives proof of great realism as he does not appeal to divine laws or great moral principles, but simply observes reality with a dispassionate eye and draws forth certain logical conclusions. The distinction that he draws between respectable women and prostitutes seems to have, rather than a moral significance of reproof for common harlots, a practical one of confirming the division of space into public and private, that the social structure of his time rested upon, and that he does not question. According to this logic, respectable women belong to the internal, private space which is their domain, and they must not be mixed up with those who, like men, belong to the external, public space. The courtesan has a function in the sphere of public life—she can sing, dance, recite and compose poetry, in short she is able to participate in the social life of men, whom she has the job of entertaining as she shares that space—and she has a precise social position, blamable on the theoretical plane, but recognized and esteemed on the practical one, constituting as it does the means that permits this type of social structure to remain intact.

At the courts of the various Indian rulers and princes—which the English would later gradually deprive of power and then supplant—and particularly at the court of Lucknow, the courtesans, *ṯavā'if*, constituted a very influential group. They associated with princes, nobles, merchants, men who wielded money and power and who sometimes asked their help in climbing the ladder of success. They dictated the laws of fashion, etiquette, music, dance, they enjoyed the regard of the court, their receptions were eagerly-awaited social occasions. Often the young men of

---

[8]Mirzā Muḥammad Hādī Rusvā, *Umrā'ō Jān Adā*, tr. by David Matthews (Delhi: Rupa & Co., 1996, pp. 162–3. (All future references are to this translation and page numbers are noted in the text following a quoted passage.)

noble families were encouraged to frequent the most famous houses of pleasure in order to learn good manners, etiquette, the art of conversation and a taste for poetry. The courtesans were after all a pillar of the culture and society of Lucknow.

The price to pay for all this—that is, for participation in public life, for sharing the external space with men—is, according to what Rusvā clearly implies, exclusion from the world of respectable women whose honor must be saved through seclusion. This exclusion of course means liberty of movement and independence from men, but it implies an assumption of responsibility and the ability to renounce a normal emotional life.

In what Oldenburg, in the above-mentioned article, represents as an alternative lifestyle, the real courtesan—the one who has the skills of her profession—does not in fact depend upon the man, but makes use of him. In Umrā'ō's narration the quintessential courtesan is the character Bismillāh, daughter of the brothel-keeper, who puts into practice all the tricks of the trade, who is completely mercenary and absolutely unreliable. The episode involving her first client, the young Navāb Čʰabban, illustrates Bismillāh's absolute indifference to him. Once he has fallen into ruin, she remains impassable in the face of his desperation, interested only in getting the last jewels out of him. Her cruelty is brought out in the episode of the *maulvī*, who though old and saintly, is so smitten by her as not even to refuse to make a fool of himself and put his own life at risk by climbing to the top of a tree in order to satisfy one of her whims. Her taste for deceit and mockery is shown in the way she torments him with jealousy, pretending to be intimate with Gauhar Mirzā, who is in reality Umrā'ō's lover. All of which shows that it is Bismillāh who controls the game, maintaining the composure that allows her to glean the maximum from her profession by manipulating men.

The character Khanum, the brothel-keeper, illustrates the economic independence of these women who in the most fortunate cases went from the profession of *ṯavā'if* to *chandharayan*, owner and manager of their house, allowing them even to pay for and maintain men for their exclusive pleasure. Khanum, who is past her fifties, can in fact permit herself the luxury of keeping a former lover in her house, a man, now old, who is considered a sort of trophy, for, having come to her forty years earlier dressed in his wedding-suit, he was unable to bid her farewell and has remained with her for the rest of his days. She also keeps a young man, a boy of nineteen, whom she clothes and feeds, whose family she looks after, and whom she has even had the heart to marry off, without how-

ever once permitting him to spend the night with the wife she has given him. Moreover, keeping men was the custom for such women, and there is no question of these men being opportunists, rather the reverse, as Umrā'ō herself explains, mentioning how she undertook the expenses of her Gauhar Mirzā:

> All courtesans, as a rule, keep a man for themselves, and derive many benefits from him. The first thing is that when there is no one else around, he at least provides pleasant company. There are no problems with shopping. If you order food from someone else, you get something, but your man will take special pains to scour the city for the very best. If you fall ill, you always get the finest treatment, all that you need for relaxation, and he will massage your legs all night long. He will run for medicine in the morning, give the doctor precise instructions, inform your friends and acquaintances, bring you herbs and powders. Whenever there is a wedding, he will take the responsibility of arranging a performance for you. In social gatherings he will draw peoples' attention to you. When you dance and sing, he will keep time for you, praise every note loudly, extol every modulation, explain every movement of the mime. Through his good offices, you get the best to eat, and are treated with much more courtesy than the other girls. On top of that you are given prizes and awards. If you happen to meet an aristocrat or a noble, he is very good at making them just that little bit jealous. The noble wants the girl to love him and him alone; the girl, however, praises her man to the skies. You begin with the sentence: "Your honour, I belong to him; I don't think I should meet you. He will be coming home shortly. I think you'd better go now. After all, he is mine for ever. You could never be that."
>
> Your man has influence over your clients, and if there is any bother, he is always ready to help out. He knows all the wastrels and scoundrels of the city, and can round up fifty or sixty men with a snap of his fingers. … (pp. 49–50)

At the same time, the fallen woman must know how to dominate her feelings and emotions, otherwise she cannot be successful in her profession, as is evident from the ups and downs of another character in the novel, Khurshid, who really was not cut out to be a courtesan. Though exceptionally beautiful, she was not favored by fortune. But, says, Umrā'ō,

> But why blame fortune? She was her own worst enemy. She was not really suited to this profession. She was the daughter of a landowner from Baiswara, and her face betrayed her noble birth. She had looks sent from

> heaven, but the curse of her beauty was that she wanted to be loved and return the love she received. Of course, there was no shortage of men who would do anything for her. First of all, she fell in love with Pyare Sahib, who spent thousands on her and really gave her his heart and soul. Khurshid put him to the test, and when she was sure of him, she gave him her heart and soul in return. For days on end, she refused to eat, and if one day he did not turn up or was late, she would howl her eyes out. We tried to give her advice: "Look, Khurshid! You must not go on like this. Men are heartless creatures. All you have with him is a passing liaison, and a liaison has no foundation. He will never marry you. You will regret it."
>
> When Pyare Sahib realized that she was hopelessly in love with him, he started to play up. Sometimes he would sit with her for the whole day, and sometimes he would not bother to come at all. Then Khurshid would be in a terrible state. Khanum was annoyed by this, and soon her visits, wages, food and drink were all cut off.
>
> The truth is that if she had been someone's wife, she would have got along very well. A husband who appreciated her worth would have drunk the water she washed her feet in. … (p. 91)

The only luxury that a courtesan cannot permit herself is to fall in love; she must not feel pity for the heartache she causes. As Umrā'ō says at another point in the novel, in an exchange with Rusvā, the harlot's profession includes wounding the hearts of many, but there is no crime in this. She states:

> "Supposing someone sees me at a fair or in a performance and loses his heart to me. He knows he can't have me for nothing and that breaks his heart. Is that my fault? Then there may be someone who can afford me, but I am engaged with someone else, or perhaps I don't want him. It is my choice, and I can do nothing about it. After all no one has a monopoly on me. He might get hurt, but the pain is his own doing." (p. 152)

Nevertheless, preventing oneself from loving and from being loved is not always easy, especially at the end of one's career when one would like to withdraw from the profession and lead a quiet life with only one man. The wise Umrā'ō, however, knows well that "No sensible man would give his heart to a whore, because she knows that she can never belong to anyone or return his love. Apprentice prostitutes are always on the make, and will give nothing in return for what they receive" (p. 193). And, at the end of the novel she says,

> I have some parting advice to those who follow my profession, and urge them to take heed of it.
>
> "My poor, simple prostitutes! Never entertain the false hope that any man will ever love you with a true heart. The lover who gives his body and soul to you will depart in a few days. He will never settle down with you, and you are not even worthy of that. Only the virtuous, who see one face and never turn to another, will have the pleasure of true love. You, women of the street, will never find such a blessing from God. …" (p. 200)

Umrā'ō regrets that it was her lot in life to be a fallen woman; hers was not a choice but a mischance, for she was kidnapped as a young girl and sold to Khanum's brothel. And yet she admits that she would not know how to live imprisoned within four walls as respectable women are:

> I have repented of my sins with a true heart, and do my best to say my prayers regularly. It is true that I still live like a whore, and whether I live or die, I could not let myself be suffocated by observing purdah. (p. 199)

And in other parts of the novel, her awareness of having enjoyed luxuries, finery and culture inaccessible to the majority of women is apparent, the pride of having reached the heights of the art of pleasing, as a singer, dancer and poetess, and even the satisfaction of having been able to survive and assert herself by her own strength in conditions in which a respectable woman would not know what to do.

When she describes the house at Khanum where she came as a girl, she says admiringly of the courtesans who lived there,

> Apart from us, there were a dozen or so girls who had separate rooms and their own staff. They presided over their own "courts," each one more beautiful than the other. They were all decked with jewels, and what elegant dresses they wore! But the kind of plain clothes we had for everyday wear other prostitutes never even had on festive days. Khanum's house was like a fairy-land. Every room you entered echoed to the sound of laughter and merriment, singing and music. (pp. 21–2)

Subsequently, each time she describes one of her companions she does not fail to underscore the elegance of her clothes and the richness and refinement of her jewels. One need only think, for example, of the preparations for the fair at 'Aish Bāgh, the famous park in Lucknow.

> Khurshid, Amir Jan, Bismillah Jan and I were busy dressing up for the occasion. We had been given pea-green scarves, and were combing and

> plaiting our hair. …
>
> That day Khurshid looked wonderful. How her green muslin scarf suited her complexion; her purple embroidered pyjamas with wide flapping ankles and her tightly drawn blouse would cause havoc. On her arms and neck she wore light jewelled chains; she had a diamond stud in her nose; in her ears heavy gold rings. Their beauty was enhanced by her fine bracelets and pearl necklace. …
>
> Bismillah was not so bad either. The dark complexion of her face with classic features, her aquiline nose and big eyes with dark pupils, her healthy, plumpish body and her smallish stature set off well her apparel—a brocade suit, a pea-green crepe scarf, hemmed with gold and silver thread, yellow satin-pyjamas, priceless jewels covering her form from top to toe, and a crown of flowers in her hair. … (pp. 93–4)

The detailed account of the excellent training she had received in music, in Persian literature and in poetry, which, thanks to her natural talent for singing and her passion for poetry would have made her one of the most acclaimed artists from her first performance, shows her pride at being an educated woman, capable of competing with the best poets at poetry gatherings. Her fame as a singer of elegies—an art which she had had the chance to learn when visiting an old aristocrat, a master in the art of singing lamentations on the death of Imām Ḥusain—would eventually open even the door of the royal court to her:

> My ability to sing dirges was well known, and no one knew more of the finer points of the art than I. Even the greatest masters did not dare open their mouths in my presence, and it was for this reason that I gained access to the court of Nawab Malika Kishvar. Every Muharram, I received much attention also from the royal circle. I also excelled in the art of the elegy, and in the evening, after having performed my lamentation in the Imambara, I was obliged to stay at the palace door until two in the morning. (p. 69)

As for enterprise and the ability to look after herself, the passage in which she describes the conditions that she found herself in after having fled with the gentleman-thief Faiz Ali, and after his arrest, is most eloquent.

> The sight that greeted me when I awoke was enough to make me appreciate all that I had left behind in Lucknow. Heaven knows what I had landed myself in for. How I remembered the luxury of my own place,

> where all I had to do was to call out and a man would come running with a hookah, *pan* and food. I waited all morning, but still no sign of Faiz Ali. If any respectable woman had found herself in this situation, she would have been dead by this time, but I had plenty of experience with other men. Let alone Kanpur, I knew little of the streets and alleys of Lucknow. All I had seen was the inn, the bazaar and the interior of this house. I got up and unbolted the door. (p. 117)

Then, hiding out in a mosque, she seeks the help of the *maulvī* in getting set up in the city.

> To be fair, he helped me a great deal when I was in Kanpur. Through him I managed to hire a room which was furnished with a comfortable tape bed. I bought a quilt, a white floor-sheet, curtains for my privacy, a selection of copper utensils and other necessary things. I engaged a servant to cook for me and another to do the housework; then I found two more to look after my daily affairs. I began to live quite comfortably. The main problem was finding musicians. Several came along, but I did not care for their style of playing. Finally I acquired a good tabla player, who turned out to be from Khalifa Ji's family. Now the room began to resound to the sound of music well into the night. When the news got round that a courtesan had arrived from Lucknow, many clients came to me, and the poetry once more began to flow. My engagement-book was completely full, and by doing one performance after another, I earned a lot of money, though I never really cared for the manners and speech of the people of Kanpur. I thought of Lucknow a great deal, but I was so happy with my newly found independence that I had no desire to return. (p. 122)

After the Mutiny, however, the *dolce vita* of Lucknow was destined to a slow and inexorable decline, beside the melancholy sunset of its nobles, whose *sharīf* values would gradually be supplanted by the Victorian morality imported by the English, upsetting the social status of the courtesans. Umrā'ō, an intelligent woman, foretells this in the way she speaks of Lucknow after her return to the city.

> When I arrived at Lucknow, I went straight to Khanum's house. Nothing much seemed to have changed, except that many of the old clients had left for Calcutta or other places. There was a new administration and new laws. Asaf ud Daula's Imambara now housed a fort; many houses had been demolished and new ones built in their place. Some streets had been widened and the drains had been repaired. It was not the

same Lucknow at all. (p. 149)

The same melancholy pervades the pages where the protagonist speaks of the end of Khanum.

> I had separated from Khanum, but while she was alive, I always regarded her as my protector, and it is true that she had a great affection for me also. She had acquired such great wealth that she had no need for more, and in her old age she cared little for worldly things. She no longer bothered about how much her girls earned, but still cherished them, and never wanted them to be apart from her. I was one of her favourites. Bismillah had given her much pain, and she had developed a sort of hatred for her. Even so, she was her daughter. After the Mutiny, Khurshid Jan returned to live with Khanum; Amir Jan lived separately, but frequently paid visits.
>
> The room that Khanum had given me so long ago always remained at my disposal. All my things were still there, and I had the key. I could come and go as I chose, and no matter where I was staying during the year, I always observed the Muharram rituals in my own room, where, until Khanum died, I kept the replica of Husain's tomb, which still bore my name.
>
> I had met the Begum on a Thursday. The next day, someone came to tell me that Khanum was unwell, and would like to see me. I at once called for a palanquin. I sat with Khanum for a while, and, as I was leaving, I thought I would take an embroidered gown from my room. I opened the door, and saw that it was full of cobwebs, the bed was thick with dust, the carpets were turned back, and rubbish was strewn everywhere. What a contrast from the old days, when my room used to be so neat and tidy. It would be swept four times a day, the bedding would be regularly beaten, and not a speck of dust was to be seen. Now I had no desire to sit there even for a moment, and when I looked at my bed, I had a feeling of disgust. I told the man who was with me to clean away the cobwebs with his brush. With my own hands I unrolled the rug, and we both laid it back in its place. We spread the white sheet on the floor, and taking off the matress [sic], I gave it a beating. Then, having arranged the *pan*-box, the beauty-case and the spittoon in the way they used to be, I plumped the pillows and sat down on my bed. My man offered me a *pan*, and as I chewed it, I looked at myself in the mirror. Memories of the past came flooding back, those wonderful days when I had been young; I recalled my patrons and my clients—Gauhar Mirzā's wicked playfulness,

> Rashid Ali's stupidity, Faizu's true love, Nawab Sultan's good looks, in short every detail of those who had sat with me in that room, which now became a magic lantern. (pp. 173–4)

Once the old values had faded out, the style of life gradually changed and little by little society pushed those harlots who had at one time been the guardians of the "gracious life," made up of music and poetry, to the margins and accentuated their role as prostitutes. About a half century later, Sa'adat Ḥasan Manṭō writes in a society whose premises had been put into question and which had undergone considerable changes; he moves in an intellectual world that had left behind it the revivalism and modernism of the end of the 1800's, which had been the cultural background for Rusvā and in whose domain the debate about the female situation had emerged. On the one hand, women have by now become a symbol for a model of society that wants to distinguish itself from the western one. On the other hand, British politics have already imposed a cultural model quite far from the *sharīf* one, they have produced a class of westernized people ready to collect the colonial inheritance, and they have unhinged traditional society by setting up the process of modernization.

Manṭō's literary theories, despite his reluctance to articulate them, appear relatively consistent with the first doctrines of the Progressives, doctrines that still feel the effects of the atmosphere created by the predecessors of the *Aṅgārē* group, in their declaration of war against bourgeois hypocrisy, taking hunger, exploitation, sexual repression as their literary subjects. It is in believing that literature can provide a solution to the social ills it denounces, though all the same describing them realistically, that he departs from their doctrines. In particular when he speaks of women and prostitutes, he demonstrates that he is capable of profound psychological insight, creating real people and not pretexts for reformist sermons. He paints the reality he sees, and "[i]f you cannot bear these stories that means this is an unbearable time. The evils in me are those of this era."[9] The reality of his fallen women is one of disgrace, marginality and desperation, in a society that exploits them without offering them any space.

Squalor, violence, cruelty are characteristic of a situation without the

---

[9]As quoted in Leslie A. Flemming, *Another Lonely Voice: The Urdu Short Stories of Saadat Hasan Manto* (Berkeley: Center for South and Southeast Asia Studies, University of California, 1979), p. 32.

possibility of redemption in "Sau Kainḍal Pāvar kā Balb" (A Hundred Candle Power Bulb"), where the pitiless light of a strong bulb sums up the desperation of a prostitute whose pimp prevents her even from sleeping, spurring her to a final rebellion—the murder of the exploiter—that seals her damnation. The common harlot drawn by Manṭō, far from being mistress of herself, is incapable of managing herself; she lets men exploit her without being able to find a way out of her dependence, except by extreme measures which signal her degradation. The same thing happens in "Hatak" ("Insult"), one of his most regarded and artistically successful stories, in which the protagonist, deeply wounded by the refusal of a potential client, ends up chasing away even the man with whom she had until then maintained the semblance of an amorous relationship, finding refuge in the embrace of a mangy dog. It is almost like saying, if she must be disgraced, she might as well go all the way, without dissembling, and sink into what is her own reality, defined by her surroundings.

> Numerous odds and ends were scattered around the cramped room without any particular design. Under the bed lay several pairs of worn-out *chappals*. A mangy dog lay on them, grimacing at some invisible thing in its sleep. Because the mange had destroyed the dog's hair in several places, it looked from the distance like a folded-up outdoor mat.
>
> A small shelf served as her dressing table and held her rouge, lipstick, powder, and comb, as well as the hairpins she stuck into her knot of hair. Nearby, a green parrot slept with its head under its wing in a cage hanging from a long peg. The cage was filled with rotten orange peels and pieces of an unripe guava. Tiny, little, blackish flies and mosquitoes buzzed around these smelly bits of fruit.
>
> Right near the bed stood a chair, the back badly stained from the number of heads that had pressed against it. To its right stood a beautiful three-legged table which held a His Master's Voice portable grammophone covered with a worn-out, old, black cloth. Colored grammophone needles were scattered not only on the table but [also] in every corner of the room. Four frames containing the pictures of four different men hung on the wall right above the table.
>
> A short distance from the pictures, that is, in the corner on the left immediately inside the door, hung a brightly colored picture of the elephant-headed god, Ganesh. This picture, which might have been cut from a piece of cloth and framed, was garlanded with both fresh and dried-out flowers. A small, grease-covered shelf next to the picture held a

> small cup of oil placed there to light an oil lamp which lay nearby. In the closed air of the room the flame of the oil lamp stood straight up like the beauty mark on a woman's forehead. Incense sticks of various sizes also littered the shelf.[10]

Though convinced of the contrary, Saugandʰī hasn't even the smallest understanding of the art of her profession, for she allows herself to become emotionally attached to anyone.

> Every night the customer, new or old, would declare his love for her. Although Saugandhi knew full well he was lying, she would melt like wax and really believe it. Love—what a beautiful word. She wished it would melt so she could rub it all over her body and it would penetrate all her pores. Again, she wished she could shrink and enter it and envelop herself in it. Sometimes, when the sense of loving and being loved was so intense inside her, she wished she could gather the man beside her into her lap, caress him, and sing him to sleep with lullabies.
>
> Her capacity for love was so great that she could have had an enduring relationship with every man who came to her. In fact, she now had ongoing relationships with the four men whose pictures hung on the opposite wall. In her heart she believed in her own goodness, but she often wondered why men did not seem to possess this same innate goodness. …[11]

This same weakness with regard to men is to be found in the Sulṭ̤āna of "Kālī Shalvār" ("The Black Shalwar"), so dependent that she is reduced to the most complete passivity, incapable even of selling herself. Closed up in her lodgings, she is neither able to leave, nor to get the black *shalvār* that she so much wants and will sacrifice her last pair of earrings for, and which becomes a symbol of her abandonment to the will of others, of men—whether the inept Khudā Bakhsh or the unpredictable Shankar. Moreover, her lack of power is already evident at the beginning of the story when, having left Ambala in order to follow Khudā Bakhsh, she is unable to get her affairs underway in Delhi, and, more and more depressed, she accepts any sum, however slight.

> But since she'd been in Delhi not a single Tommy had visited her.

---

[10]"Insult," tr. by Leslie A. Flemming, *Journal of South Asian Literature* 20:2 (Fall 1985), pp. 4–5.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

> She'd been three months now in this city, a city where she'd heard the Big Lord Sahib lived. But only six men had visited her—only six; that is, two a month. And as God was her witness she'd made only eighteen and a half rupees out of these six customers. No one would pay more than three rupees. She'd told five of them that her charge was ten rupees—and was surprised when every one of them said, "Not a penny more than three." God knows why, but not one of them thought her worth more than three. So when the sixth one came she herself said, "Listen, I charge three rupees a time...."[12]

Sulṭāna's self-respect vanishes with the last bracelets that she gives Khudā Bakhsh to sell, and she isolates herself more and more.

> When five months had gone by and income still didn't cover even a quarter of their expenditure, Sultana grew all the more anxious. And now Khuda Bakhsh was out all day, and this upset her all the more. True, there were two or three of her neighbours she could go to see, and she could pass the time with them. But she didn't like going there every day to sit with them for hours together; so gradually she stopped going altogether. She would sit all day in her empty house, sometimes slicing betel nut and sometimes mending her old clothes. And sometimes she would go out onto the balcony and stand by the railings and aimlessly watch the moving and stationary engines in the railway sheds opposite.
>
> On the other side of the road there was a warehouse, reaching from one corner to the other. To the right, under the metal roof lay some big bales, along with piles of all sorts of goods. To the left there was an open space, criss-crossed by innumerable railway lines. When Sultana saw how these iron rails shone in the sun she would look at her hands, on which the blue veins stood out just like the railway lines. In this long, open space engines and trucks were moving all the time this way and that, puffing and clattering. When she got up early in the morning and went out onto the balcony a strange sight confronted her. Thick smoke rising from the engines through the mist, rising to the overcast sky like fat, burly men. Great clouds of steam too, rising noisily from the rails, and gradually dispersing into the air. Sometimes when she saw a carriage shunted and left to run on its own along the line she thought of herself, thought how she

[12]"The Black Shalwar," tr. by Ralph Russell, in his *Hidden in the Lute: An Anthology of Two Centuries of Urdu Literature* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995), p. 62.

> too had been shunted onto a line and left to run on her own. Others would change the points and she would move on, not knowing where she was going. And a day would come when the impetus would gradually exhaust itself and she would come to a halt somewhere, in some place she had never before seen.[13]

Not even economic necessity stirs her from her torpor, though in another story, "Laisens" ("License"), Manṭō had mentioned this as the principal factor that led a woman into prostitution. Here the widow of a *tonga* driver tries to take his place at work, but, swindled by the husband's relatives and mistreated by the city council, she is denied her vehicle license because she is a woman. Not knowing what else to do, she decides to become a prostitute after going to her husband's tomb to tell him that they've killed her. Even Shārdā, of the homonymous story, becomes a common whore from want, having been abandoned by her husband; and although she appears to have toughened up, she is still vulnerable to love. The key to her heart is her kindness for her baby girl, whom she brings with her to the squalid third-rate hotel where she meets Nażīr. The surroundings are sordid, as if to reflect the misery of those who are forced to sell themselves:

> The building was absolutely filthy. The staircase was crumbling. Below, Pathans, who lent money on interest and wore big, billowy trousers, slept on wooden cots. Christians lived on the first floor and a sizeable number of low-level airline employees on the second, while the owner of the hotel occupied the third floor. Karim ran his business from a room in a far corner of the fourth floor. Here, several girls sat huddled together like chickens in a coop.
>
> Karim sent for the key. He opened the door to a large, unsightly room whose only furnishing were a steel bed, a chair and a small table.[14]

But it's exactly this that attracted her lover, and when they have the chance to live together, and Shārdā behaves like a good wife, Nażīr loses interest.

> Sharda's body was as giving as before but the former atmosphere was no longer there, that peculiar blend of haggling, matter-of-fact transac-

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 65–6.

[14] Sa'ādat Ḥasan Manṭō, "Shārdā," in his *Manṭō-Nāma* (Lahore: Sang-e Meel Publications, 1990), p. 464; this passage translated by the *Editor*.

> tion, and the dinginess of the hotel. … Now when Nazeer squeezed Sharda against his chest, she did not resist. She was no longer the same woman, but in truth she was, and then some. In other words, the long absence had made her want to give of her body more fully. And she had also come to love Nazeer in her soul.[15]

The man becomes more and more difficult and intolerant of her attentions, and Shārdā, when she leaves, goes without waiting to be paid, and makes a last kindly gesture toward him, leaving him a little gift which is the sign of her dignity as a woman. But even in this case Manṭō indicates no way out of the misery of the disgraced woman, and limits himself to noting that quite often it is she who is better and morally superior to those who profit from her. For Manṭō, the fallen woman does not fit into a special category but is, for good or ill, simply a woman.

There is no fascination, there is no magic in the situation of the common harlot, there is no culture, there is no worldliness, there is no consciousness of living an alternate life to that of a respectable woman, there is no pride for one's own accomplishments and for one's own independence. There is only a painful resignation, liable at times to open up into gestures of protest, sometimes extreme—breaking open a pimp's head with a brick, as in "Sau Kainḍal Pāvar kā Balb"; sleeping with one's arms around a mangy dog, as in "Hatak"—sometimes submissive—the last kindness of a woman in love, as in "Shārdā"—but which mainly transform themselves into the most complete apathy—the non-life of Sultana in "Kālī Shalvār." Manṭō's world is very far from Rusvā's, and not only because time has passed: society has changed, sensibilities have changed. And it is not only because the courtesan Rusvā deals with is a sort of *dame aux camélias*, while the disgraced women whom Manṭō depicts are cheap prostitutes, for he does not see anything glamorous even in the coveted women who live in the spotlight, in the front window of success, that is, movie actresses. A few, such as Nīlam-Rādʰā of "Mērā Nām Rādʰā Hai" ("My Name is Radha") and Jāṅkī, of the homonymous story, are described as vulnerable to love and easily deceived, and only after a bitter delusion do they learn to distinguish appearance from reality. Others, like Shīlā of "Khālī Bōtlēṅ Khālī Ḍibbē" ("Empty Bottles, Empty Boxes"), become symbols of an empty life, made up only of superficiality, intrinsically absurd:

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 479; this passage translated by the *Editor*.

> For a long time I wondered who Shila looked like in that Banarsi sari. The beige, paper-thin sari was curved in some places on her slender body, flattened in others. Suddenly I had a vision of an empty bottle wrapped in thin paper.[16]

Only in exceptional cases is it a question of women who are capable of taking hold of their own lives—but they have something inhuman about them, like the disquieting Latīkā Rānī, from the story of the same title, a ruthless manipulator of other people's lives. Able to seem beautiful without even being so,[17] she methodically builds up her career calculating each move and using the people around her. She senses her husband's potential and makes him her own producer and director, whose creativity she squeezes of its last drops. What seems to be an amorous escape with one of her cinematic co-stars is nothing other than a tactic to draw public attention to herself—even up to the last scene, when she appears on the set dressed entirely in mourning, in a stage costume prepared by herself, precisely when she is informed of her husband's death.

> The news reached her that Mr. Roy was breathing his last. She fainted. As Sir Howard and other studio staff were trying to revive her, word came that Mr. Roy had died.
>
> Around ten o'clock when people arrived at her bungalow to take away the body for cremation, Latika made an appearance, clad in black sari and blouse, hair disheveled, eyes swollen. The former hero looked at her and said contemptuously, "The son of a bitch knew damn well when this scene was going to be shot [filmed] …"[18]

This scene, which is, however, open to various interpretations, marks—in the writer's opinion—the culminating point in Latika Rani's acting, in life, not in cinematic fiction. The actress had already prepared for the part, she had even readied the outfit that she had taken care to have made, though nothing was yet known about the script of the film in which it would have to be worn. And in fact she was not preparing to act in the scene of a film, but in a scene from real life, where she would have

---

[16]"Empty Bottles, Empty Boxes," tr. by Leslie A. Flemming, *Journal of South Asian Literature* 20:2 (Fall 1985), p. 60.

[17]See Sa'ādat Ḥasan Manṭō, "Latīkā Rānī," in his *Manṭō-Rāmā* (Lahore: Sang-e Meel Publications, 1990), p. 139.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 151; this translation by the *Editor*.

to appear as the incarnation of widowhood, forever the primadonna, intent on prevailing over a husband who knew her well enough to have foreseen her reaction—"The son of a bitch knew damn well when this scene was going to be shot"—robbing him of the protagonist's part even at the occasion of his own death. It is she, the widow, in the theatricality of her black-clad entrance, who is the protagonist of her husband's death, and not he—however farsighted about the behavior his wife would adopt—whose memory she is already preparing to take control of, making use of him to the last.

If we wish to accept this interpretation, Latika Rani becomes the exception that confirms the rule. Otherwise, if one considers her grief sincere and wishes to read the theatricality of her appearance as the evidence of her psychological collapse, then she too must be added to the group of female figures, lost and incapable of real independence, that Manṭō loved to depict.

Manṭō's disillusioned, and sometimes desperate, realism is a pitiless mirror of the times in which he lives and moves. The writer does not have formulas to suggest, remedies ready to cure the ills of a society which, in becoming modern, dehumanizes itself, loses its very cultural premises and no longer finds justifications for cruelty towards its weakest members. He limits himself to describing, almost photographically, the social reality which he finds himself living in; he does not consider it his business to propose reforms. And in this he differs from his contemporaries, and especially from the Progressives, perhaps because in precisely this regard he was ahead of his time. For him, anyone—man or woman, socially-integrated or marginal—is equally capable of good and evil. His "lost women" constitute the proof of this: they are only women, suffering human beings whom it is neither possible to condemn nor redeem.

What springs then from the comparison between Manṭō's way of treating the topic of the common whore and Rusvā's, in the last analysis, is that unlike Rusvā—well-established in the society that he is a part of and whose values he shares— Manṭō is a citizen of the world who has left behind him all moralizing. Which does not mean that his stories have no ethical content. Rather, on the contrary, they have an even greater one, for though he also begins with a realistic representation of the social reality which surrounds him, while not feeling it his own, his stories depart from the cultural specificity that they spring from and reach that universality which is the distinctive sign of art. ❒

—Translated by Anis Memon