MEHDI ALI SIDDIQI

Manto and I*

IT WAS THE BEGINNING OF 1953.

I was busy in my work. The courtroom was filled with litigants. My deputy came and told me, "This gentleman would like to have his case taken up expeditiously."

I looked up. A good-looking man of medium height, somewhat indisposed and quite anxious, with the top few buttons of his *shervani* undone and a muffler thrown around his neck, was saying in a shaky, rather choking voice, "I am Saʿadat Hasan Manto. I have come from Lahore. I am very ill. I accept my offence. Please, decide my case as soon as you can."

There was another man with him, standing behind him as though he had Manto in his custody. He was his guarantor, or one sent by the guarantor to see him through the trial.

I said, "Please, have a seat."

"What!"

"Please sit down," I repeated.

Manto sat down hesitantly on a bench behind my deputy. I picked up his file and started studying it.

Manto was charged for writing and publishing his short story "Ūpar, Nīčē, aur Darmiyān." I knew something about his case for some time now and I had prepared myself for it. I had never given up my fondness for literature, but at the time I wasn't abreast of fictional, especially Urdu fictional literature. So, for a few months I read only short stories. I read closely through however many collections of Manto's stories I could lay my hands on, but not the story in question nor any critical comment about it, lest I may end up with preconceived notions about the matter. You can imagine what I must have felt when Manto used the admission of his guilt as a cover.

Meanwhile I tried to look at him surreptitiously but he had disappeared from the bench and was pacing nervously on the verandah outside the

* "Manṭō aur Maiñ" appeared as "Pāñčvāñ Muqaddama—Tīn" in *Dastāvēz* (June 1982), 184–88.

courtroom.

He came inside again and said, "Please wind up my case."

"All right, but do sit down, please," I said and started to fill in the register of cases.

Manto took his seat on the bench, but kept shifting continually from side to side on his seat. When I was finished, I recorded, as per procedure, his confession. Everyone thought that I would fine him a large sum. But when I said, "Manto Sahib, I'll give my judgment tomorrow," he, more than anyone else, felt terribly disappointed.

He insisted that I settle the matter then and there. To him, this was like rendering obsolete the very purpose of an admission of guilt and the existence of magistrates. And here was I, wanting to read the story in question and think long and hard about it to establish whether it met the strictly legal definition of obscenity. Believe me, true justice requires as much genuine reflection as action. Arbitrariness and mere adherence to rules go against the spirit of justice. It is a strange aspect of our times that essence is always sacrificed to accident.

In short, however unwillingly, Manto had to consent to wait for a day.

The next day, after the court had come into session, I wrote my brief judgment. Manto had come with his companion to hear the judgment in the same agitated state as was apparent on him the day before. "Manto Sahib," I asked, "how is your financial condition?"

"Very bad."

"What is the date today?" I asked.

"Twenty-fifth," someone else answered.

"Manto Sahib, I'm fining you twenty-five rupees."

At first he didn't understand and said to his companion, "Is he asking for the date or giving his judgment?"

His guarantor was more vigorous. He quickly went to pay the fine, and Manto again started to pace on the verandah.

A little later I saw them both again in the courtroom. "Yes?" I asked. Whereupon Manto's companion said, "We've come to bother you …"

I accepted their invitation without hesitation. During court proceedings one can hardly talk freely, least of all informally, while I myself wanted to have an informal meeting with Manto because, as far as I was concerned, Manto was the greatest Urdu short story writer after Munshi Premchand.

After work I proceeded straightaway to the Zelin Coffee House. It was filled to capacity. I waited on the staircase. Meanwhile Manto and his companion materialized. Manto looked tipsy but in full control of his senses. Now and then pauses appeared in his speech, but it betrayed no interruption of thought. In the middle of speaking to me he would sometimes

make some pointed comments about me to his companion, every word of which sounded utterly sincere and unpretentious. His mind or his thoughts were free of any reservations or misconceptions, and his speech betrayed not the slightest desire to impress his addressee or be impressed by him. Fearlessly and boldly he called what was good, good, and bad, bad, though the standard by which he judged these was entirely his own and unconventional—a standard which was rock solid, unlikely to change with the times. In short, it was then that I saw, for the first time in my life, what a true realist, a candid, fearless, and great artist looked like. That image is still vivid in my mind and will remain with me forever.

Our conversation was long but interesting. "You don't drink?" he asked.

"No."

"A mullah, eh?"

"No … just a Muslim."

He started laughing. His companion ordered a coffee for me.

I learned that they had come to the coffee house just for my sake, abandoning a very lively meeting in some bar. "Actually, it is I who should have played the host," I apologized. "After all, I'm the local one …"

"No, not at all, you look like a *muhajir*,"[1] Manto remarked.

"Even so, I live in Karachi."

He then asked, "Why did you ask me to sit down during the proceedings? No magistrate has ever treated me with such courtesy."

"I do not consider rudeness a part of court manners." He immediately started laughing and said to his companion, "He seems like a decent enough fellow."

A while later he asked, "I haven't read your judgment, what have you written in it?"

I handed him a copy of my judgment. He read it carefully, and then he turned to his companion and said, as if I wasn't there, "Seems like an educated man … very educated," and then, looking at me, "All right, tell me, how far have you studied?"

I told him about my educational qualifications and certificates. He started laughing again, "Didn't I say he was a very educated man. And he writes good English, such good English… Well then, why did you sentence me?"

Precisely at that moment the realization hit me in all its intensity that this man was a true artist. Manto didn't have the foggiest idea that he had

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[1]Used for Indian Muslims who migrated to Pakistan during Partition. The word also has the connotation of a refugee who is destitute and in need of assistance. Whether Manto intended this subtle meaning is hard to say. Most likely, he did. —*Tr.*

written anything obscene; he had merely written a short story.

He 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; naturally the image bad people see in the mirror doesn't please them. They become enraged. He hadn't used a single obscene word in the story, which is absolutely true.

I wasn't ready at all to respond to him with his enthusiasm and clarity, so, to get him off my back, I merely said, "Obscene words are not the only touchstone of obscenity."

"Then what is—that one should hide the reality … you punish and fine me for speaking the truth."

Although I didn't, at the time, think it provident to give him a clear and frank answer, I still believed that there has to be some difference between reality and its expression, which must be maintained. Otherwise, what would be the justification for covering one's nakedness. Why does one look for privacy for the performance of the sexual act? Why are subtle allusion and suggestion considered literary qualities? A writer is not a photographer; he's a painter. And even photographers don't wander around snapping pictures of genitalia and scenes of cohabitation.

I evaded him again, "I'll tell you some other time why I've fined you."

"Promise?" he asked.

"I promise …"

I was unable to fulfill my promise during Manto's life. However, I'm doing so today:

> The Law doesn't wish to get in the way of literature fulfilling its demands and purpose. It only wishes that such demands and purpose be beneficial for man. If the purpose is not salutary and lies only in arousing the libido, or even does not aim to do that but the subject and words are such that they drive weak, sick or immature minds to seek erotic pleasure, then the Law establishes that such writing is harmful and obscene. "Ūpar, Nīčē, aur Darmiyān" describes the preliminaries and the background of the sexual act, and how they differ in all three strata of society. The Law doesn't find such a subject useful, even though the events described may be based on reality. The Law also recognizes that ordinary people would use them to indulge in sexual arousal and pleasure, rather than observing in them the engaging portrayal of the differences obtaining in the three layers of society. This apprehension and determination of the Law isn't all that misguided. It is possible, in fact it is certain, that writers will not agree with my assessment. I cannot elucidate the legal definition of obscenity with any more clarity than this, and neither can I provide a sounder justification for this definition.

The fact is, even from a literary point of view, I considered this story obscene, but at that time it was not pertinent to enlarge upon it.

Anyway, our meeting in the coffeehouse lasted a good hour-and-a-half or maybe two. Just as Manto had extracted a promise from me, he also made a promise to me, which he too didn't get the time to fulfill.

So this was my first and last encounter with Manto. Afterward, he wrote a couple of letters to me from Lahore. I did my best to do what he asked. But none of these favors were meant for him personally. He loved his friends and valued their friendship, and his letters asked favors only for them. His last letter to me, dated 17 January 1955, was written only a day before he died. I received it after he was no more.

But the dearest memento of our brief but entirely selfless relationship is something quite different. He had started writing the account of the trial regarding "Ūpar, Nīčē, aur Darmiyān" as "The Fifth Trial" in *Nuqūsh*. Only its first installment, which covers up to the events of his arrival at the court, is published. God knows whether he was able to complete it. I'm sure he would have expressed his opinion of me in the next installment. I had read the first installment and was eagerly waiting for the second, but the waiting prolonged.

At the tail end of 1954 I came to know that Manto had published a fresh collection of his work called *Ūpar, Nīčē, aur Darmiyān*. I felt both surprised and happy when people told me that Manto had dedicated it to me. Try as hard as one might, it is not possible to find a greater expression of Manto's sincere affection and trust than this. I'm not a well-known person. I'm happy this will perhaps give my name a few moments of life as a literary curio. ❑

—Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon