

Writings of Manto in English Clothes

by Asma Kazmi

Writing about his translation of Victor Hugo, Manto explained that he had dressed Hugo's masterpiece in Urdu clothes. *Mootni* and *Khushai*, two powerful short stories of Manto, feel ill at ease in English clothes. Perhaps this is so because this work is a product of the post-colonial examination of cultural decay in South Asia. *Khushai* is a tale of sexual anxiety and the social constructs of masculine identity. I chose *Mootni* because of its raw and vivid descriptions of human waste and degradation, serving as a metaphor for the corroding sociopolitical climate at the time of partition of India.

Manto was born in 1912, in the province of Punjab in India. After the partition of the Indian Subcontinent, Manto moved to Lahore, Pakistan. Much of his writing deals with this historical moment and its impact on people of all social classes. The partition led to a huge transfer of people across the Indian-Pakistani border, giving rise to a bloody ethnic conflict. Manto's fictional work reinterprets South Asian history from the point of view of the man on the street, the prostitute, the inmate at an insane asylum.

Shithouse

A short distance from the Congress House and Jinnah Hall is a public latrine. This latrine is called "shithouse" in Bombay's vernacular. Nearby neighborhoods dump their filth outside this polluted dark room. The intense stench that surrounds the "shithouse" forces men to cover their noses when walking through the market.

He found himself near the "shithouse" and he needed to take a piss. In this predicament, he covered his nose with a handkerchief and held his breath before entering the stinking shit hole. Inside, feces were bubbling on the floor and the walls were covered in diagrams of the human reproductive organs. On the wall in front of him were these words written with coal:

"Pakistan is the Muslims' sisters' cunt. Fuck it!"

These words magnified the foul smell and he hurried to leave this place.

The government controls Jinnah Hall and the Congress House, yet the "shithouse" comes under no jurisdiction. It freely flaunts its rotten putridity. The outside of this structure is embellished by piles of garbage, brought here from nearby neighborhoods. These obscene mounds keep growing.

On another day, he had to urinate. He reluctantly covered his nose and entered the "shithouse." Runny diarrhea was drying in a crusty mass on the floor. Illustrations of procreative genitalia had multiplied. Someone responding to "Pakistan is the Muslims' sister's cunt. Fuck it!" wrote these vulgar words underneath it:

"Hindustan is the Hindus' mothers' cunt. Fuck it hard!"

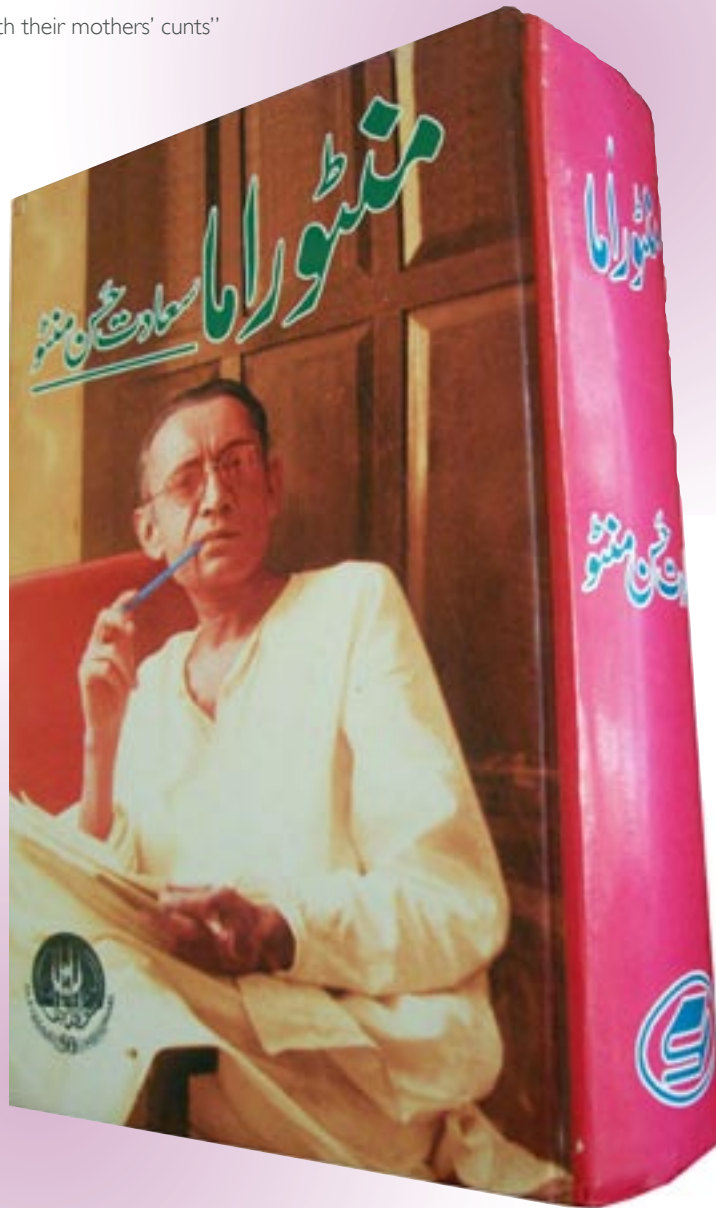
Reading this heightened the stench for him to a repugnant acidic level. He rushed out of there.

Mahatma Gandhi was unconditionally released from prison. Mohammed Ali Jinnah lost Punjab and had no support from the Muslim majority areas in the creation of the new nation. Jinnah Hall and the Congress House were neither released nor lost. They remained as they always were: under the control of the government and oppressed from the stench of the "shithouse." Neighborhoods in close proximity kept bringing heaps of their garbage and filth here.

For the third time he was forced to use the "shithouse," this time not just to urinate. He covered his nose, held his breath and entered this lair of putrescence. The floor was infested with vermin and the walls were drowning with images of shameful parts of the human body.

The words "Pakistan is the Muslims' sisters' cunt. Fuck it!" and "Hindustan is the Hindus' mothers' cunt. Fuck it hard!" were overpowered by other obscenities. Conspicuous and bold, written in white chalk were the following words:

"Fuck both their mothers' cunts"



Momentarily, he forgot about the foul smell that surrounded him. Slowly, he left the "shithouse," his olfactory senses creating an illusion that there was an unnamable scent in the air. This was a fleeting mirage.

Khushia (an excerpt)

Spending time on the dark platform was part of Khushia's routine. He had visited Khaitwari's fifth lane today, before making his way to the platform. Kanta, who had recently moved here from Mangoor, lived at the edge of the fifth lane. Khushia was told that she was changing her home. To confirm this news he had gone to see her.

He knocked on Kanta's door and he heard her voice, "Who is it?" He replied, "I am Khushia."

The door opened after a short delay. Khushia entered and was shocked at what he saw when he turned around. He saw Kanta completely naked. She was practically completely naked even though she was holding a towel up to her body. But one cannot say that she was covered, because all the body parts that need to be concealed were completely exposed in front of Khushia's shocked eyes.

"What brings you here, Khushia? I was about to go and take a bath...sit...sit...you should have asked the guy outside for a cup of tea... you know, Rama ran away."

Khushia was one whose eyes had never seen a woman naked so abruptly. He was disturbed and speechless. He had set eyes on shameful-ness without warning and he wanted to hide somewhere.

In a hurry, all he could say was, "go...go take a bath." The his tongue loosened, "If you were naked, why did you open the door? You could have called out...I would have come back... but go...take a bath."

He was still seeing Kanta's naked body. Her skin was as firm as the hide tightened on drums. She seemed unaware of Khushia's wandering eyes. In spite of his astonishment, he did search her dark even skin but Kanta did not even get goose bumps. She stood there unmoved, like a sculpture carved from a dark stone.

There was a man standing in front of her! A man, whose eyes can reach a woman's body even through layers of clothing. A man, who can reach many places through his imagination. But she did not worry about this at all and her eyes showed no sign of emotion, like they had just been washed. She should have withdrawn. Her cheeks should have blushed. It is true that she was a prostitute, yet prostitutes don't stand around naked.

He had been a pimp for ten years. During these years, he had known every secret of the prostitutes that he had worked with. For instance, he knew that the girl who lived at the edge of Paidhoni with a young man that she called her brother, constantly played "what is the reason for your love, love, love" on her broken tape recorder. She was madly in love with Ashok Kumar.¹ Many rascals got in her pants by falsely promising her that they would introduce her to Ashok Kumar. He also knew that the Punjabi woman who lived in Dawr, wore a western suit because her lover had once told her that her legs were just like the American actress who starred in "Morocco." She saw this movie over and over again, since her lover had told her that Marlene Dietrich wore pants because her legs were beautiful and that Marlene had insured her legs for two hundred thousand rupees. To be like the American actress, she wore pants which were excessively tight on her buttocks. He also knew that the woman from Mazgou went after beautiful young men in college because she wanted to have beautiful children. He also knew that her wish would never come true because she was infertile. She was infertile like the dark skinned woman from Madras, who always wore fake diamond earrings. This woman knew well that her dark complexion would never change yet she wasted her money on skin lightening creams and medicines.

He knew all about the private lives of his prostitutes. What he could not predict was that one day Kanta Kumari, whose real name is too difficult to pronounce, would expose herself in front of him and give him the biggest shock of his life.

Deep in thought, his mouth got really full with saliva and the red liquid of the betel leaf that he was chewing on. He could barely chew on the tiny pieces of chalia, that were swimming around in his mouth.

His bare forehead was covered in small beads of perspiration, like cottage cheese being squeezed tightly in a cloth. He felt that his masculinity had been attacked. When he recalled Kanta's naked body, he felt that he had been violated.

He thought to himself, "What is this but an insult? The woman stood in front of me completely naked and said that it is no big deal...it's just Khushia. She thinks of me like the damn cat that constantly sleeps on her bed."

He recognized that indeed it was an insult. He was a man and he knew that all women, whether decent or of the market, should recognize him as a man. **BP**

Kanta smiled and said, "When I heard the name Khushia, I thought to myself that there is no harm in letting him in...it's just Khushia...let him come in."

Khushia could not erase the memory of her smile from his mind. At this very moment he could imagine Kanta's naked body in front of his eyes. Her body was like a wax sculpture, which was melting.

Her body was beautiful. For the first time Khushia realized that prostitutes can have firm bodies. This fact amazed him. The thing that amazed him the most was that she had no shame in standing in front of him with no clothes on. Why was that?

Kanta had given him this answer, "When I heard the name Khushia, I thought to myself that there is no harm in letting him in...it's just Khushia...let him come in."

Kanta and Khushia were in the same line of work. He was her pimp. In this regard, he belonged to her but this was not enough reason for her to get naked in front of him. There had to have been another reason for her behavior. Khushia was trying to interpret the meaning of her words.

Her reasoning was clear, yet at the same time it made little sense to him and he could not come to a conclusion.

¹ Indian movie star.

Saadat Hasan Manto by Manto Rama Sang-e-Meel Publications Lahore, 1998
Titles of short stories: 'Mootni' & 'Khushai'