

Sa‘adat Hasan Manto (1912-1955)¹

The bitterness of Sa‘adat Hasan Manto’s portrayal of commercialization in “The Progressive Graveyard” derives in part from the event that prompts the main narrative: the death of his mother in Bombay. As with Manto’s vignettes on Partition, “Black Margins,” “The Progressive Graveyard” presents the reader with a bleakly humorous commentary on a painful incident, turning the experience of giving his mother a proper burial into an excoriation not merely of the manner in which this particular graveyard transforms every part of the funeral into a money-making endeavour, but of the influence of what he understands as imported “English” notions of culture (*tahzib*) and progress (*taraqqi*), which words become synonymous with this seemingly total commercialization.

Strikingly for an author who was and continues to be criticized for writing “pornographic” literature, Manto begins his essay with a satirical diatribe against English culture’s perversion of Indian sexual mores. Even here, the aspersions that he casts on what he understands as the increasing shamelessness and frivolous self-ornamentation of women are tied to his sense of the excessive commercialization of acts such as courtship, marriage, and sex that are supposedly outside of the commercial realm. All of this may be somewhat surprising to the reader familiar with Manto’s defenses of prostitution in other essays (see “*Ismat-faroshi*” [“Selling Chastity”]) and his many sympathetic portrayals of sex workers, probably the most famous example being “*Kali shalwar*” or “Black Shalwar.”

Following these opening remarks, the subject of the essay moves away from sexual matters to the central example of the commercialization of the graveyard in which Manto’s mother is interred. Through a series of clever comparisons to the cinema, classified advertisements, the

¹ For a short biography of Manto, see Richard Delacy’s article in this volume.

barber shop, etc., which are unproblematically understood as belonging to the business world, Manto paints a scathing picture of a society in which regard for one's fellow and reverence for the dead is replaced by indiscriminate financial exploitation.

The Progressive Graveyard²

How can we enumerate the virtues of English culture and civilization? What haven't they bestowed upon us uncivilized Indians? They've told our uncouth women of brand new ways to display their feminine features. They've taught them to wear sleeveless blouses to demonstrate their bodily virtues, they've stolen away their *missi* and lamp-black, and filled up their makeup-boxes with lipstick, rouge powder and other beautifying things. Before, tweezers were only useful for plucking nose-hairs or moustache-hairs, but European culture has taught our women to pluck the hair of their eyebrows as well.

It is a blessing of this very culture that any woman who wants to can get a license and traffic her body. The civil marriage law is there for progressive men and women: get married whenever you want, get divorced whenever you want. You spend practically nothing, but still get it all.³ There are dance halls where you can put your chest against women's chests and participate in many kinds of dance. There are clubhouses where you can lose all of your wealth gambling, in a highly cultured manner. If it in fact happens that you are ever in the law's grip, then there are bars where you may drown your sorrows.

English culture and civilization have made our nation progressive indeed, for now our women can walk about the markets wearing pants. There are even some who wear next to

² *Manto-numa*. Lahore: Sang-i mil, 1999. pp. 723-731.

³ "*Hing lagti na phatkari magar rang cokha ata hai*," that is, neither assafoetida nor alum is applied (for beautification) but complexion turns out clear.

nothing, but they can still roam about freely. Our country has become very progressive, because now it is being proposed that a “naked club” should be opened here too.

Those people who tell their English benefactors to leave India are crazy. If they leave India, then who will keep the naked club going here? And these dance houses, who will look after them? How will we dance chest-to-chest with women? Will our prostitutes’ quarters not become desolate? Who will teach us to fight one another? Who, then, will make the clothes that come here, made in Manchester from our cotton plants? Who will give us these nice, tasty biscuits that we eat?

The progress that has fallen to our lot under the reign of the English would not fall to our lot under anyone else’s reign. Even if we do become free, we will not understand the stratagems of government that these governors understand – the governors under whose reign so much progress has been made, not only on our hotels, clubs, dance houses and cinemas, but on our graveyards as well.

In non-progressive countries, the dead are picked up and buried, as if they were of no value at all. But this is not what happens in progressive graveyards. I got a sense of this progress when my mother passed away in Bombay. I was used to living in small and relatively uncultured cities. How should I have known that in big cities the government lays restrictions even on the dead?

My mother’s body was lying in the next room. Stricken with grief, I was sitting on a sofa with my head cast down, when a gentleman who had been living in Bombay for a while said to me, “Brother, you folks should think about the shroud and the burial now.”

I said, “Well, you’ll have to do it yourself, since I’ve just arrived here.”

He answered, “I’ll do everything, but first you should get someone to send an announcement saying that your mother has passed away.”

“To whom?”

“It’s very important to send an announcement to the municipality office, which is just nearby, because until you get a certificate from them, you won’t get permission to bury her in the graveyard.”

An announcement was sent to this office. From there, there came a man who began asking all sorts of questions. What was the illness, for how long had the deceased been ill, which doctor was treating her....

The reality was that my mother had passed away in my absence due to heart failure, obviously she wasn’t under anyone’s treatment, nor had she been ill for a long while. Therefore I told the man the truth, but he wasn’t satisfied, and he said, “You will have to show a doctor’s certificate to demonstrate that the death really was due to heart failure.”

I was confounded: where would I get a doctor’s certificate? Therefore some harsh words escaped my mouth, but my friend who had been settled in Bombay for a long time got up and took the man aside. He kept talking for a while, and then he gestured toward me and said, “So, he’s a complete ignoramus, he has no knowledge of how things work around here.” Then he took two rupees out of my pocket and gave them to the man, who immediately became absolutely fine. He said, “Now, please give me a few empty medicine bottles so that there will at least be some sort of proof of the illness. If there are any old prescriptions and things, give those to me as well.”

He said some other things along the same lines, hearing which I felt for a short while that I had murdered my own mother, and this man sitting in front of me was taking pity on me and wanted to keep the secret to himself, and was telling me of methods by which the traces of the murder could be erased. At the time, I wanted to push him outside, to take as many empty bottles

as there were lying about in the house, one by one, and smash his brainless head. But thank goodness for culture: I stayed quiet, had some bottles taken out, and rendered them into his possession.

After giving a two-rupee bribe, I obtained the municipality's certificate. Now the gate of the graveyard was open to us. Beside the great iron gate, there was a little room like a booking office adjoining a cinema. A man peeped out of its window and, seeing the funeral procession going in, he was about to say something, when my friend handed over the sheet that we had gotten from the municipality office. Then the graveyard's manager was satisfied that the funeral procession hadn't entered without a ticket.

It was a very beautiful graveyard. In one place, there was a grove of trees, under whose shadow there lay some well-built graves. Nearby these graves grew Spanish jasmines, Arabian jasmines and rosebushes. When we asked, we found out that this was the graveyard's highest grade, where high-class men bury their loved ones. You must pay the grave's price, Rs. 300 in total. After giving this amount, you may make a well-built grave for your loved one. If you want it to be taken care of, you have to pay six rupees more every year, and when the manager gets this amount, he will make sure that the grave is kept in good condition.

As for those who can't afford three hundred rupees, their graves are dug up and effaced after three or four years, and other dead bodies are buried in their places. The shade of trees and the fragrance of Spanish and Arabian jasmines and roses don't fall to the lot of these graves. Here, a special kind of masala is mixed up with the earth at the time of burial, so that the body and its bones will decompose quickly.

Since row upon row of graves of the same shape and form have gone in, a number has been placed on every grave so that it will be easy to identify. You can get this number for four annas.

These days the same thing is done in good cinemas: numbered tickets are given out so that there's no confusion in the hall, and so that one can sit in the seat corresponding to the number one has been given. When a dead body is buried, the graveyard's overseer plants a special number written on an iron board near the grave, and it remains planted there until that grave is emptied for another dead body. Getting a number makes things so much easier! In your notebook you can enter the grave numbers of your loved ones:

shoe number: 5

sock number: 9 ½

insurance policy number: 225689

mother's grave number: 4817

phone number: 44457

And if the world makes any more progress, we'll receive our grave numbers the moment we're born. As soon as we entered the graveyard, a beautiful mosque came into view, outside of which a notice was written on a large board with the title "Important Information":⁴

*If any person should wish to build an earthen mound for his heir, then he tell gravedigger to make it, no body else can make it. For making a big grave, Rs. 2, 4 annas, out of it 1¼ rupees are for gravedigger's labor and one rupee belongs to the graveyard. 1¼ rupees for a small grave, out of it 12 annas are for gravedigger's labour and 8 annas belongs to the graveyard. If he does not give it, his mound will be removed. No one is allowed to live in the graveyard. Yes they can come with the dead body and then take the provisions for the dead and go outside.*⁵

Whether it is a man or a woman, if any dead body comes in from outside without having been bathed, and the one who will bathe it comes with it, 4 annas will be taken for the graveyard.

⁴ Manto's renditions of this notice and the ones following contain untranslatable grammatical errors, apparently mimicking Bombay Urdu. I have tried to compensate by using incorrect grammar here and there.

Whatever dead body is bathed at night will be charged two annas for light. No body should have a fight in the graveyard, if he does then he will be handed over to the police. If the grave's heirs should leave the job of watering and planting trees on their mounds to the gravediggers, they will be charged 4 annas a month. If any gentleman should not give this amount, his grave will not have water given to it or trees grown on it. – Managing Trustee.

There is a sort of similarity between cinema advertisements and this graveyard's announcement, because there too, we find it written: "Those who drink and cause a fight will be handed over to the police." It's very likely that as the world progresses, this announcement will keep being amended, and some day words such as the following will be added:

In the event of an earthquake or bombardment, the manager shall not refund the price of the graves. If any gentleman should desire to have an air raid shelter constructed over the grave of his loved one, he must pay an extra 2 ½ rupees. However, in such a case, the manager will still not be responsible for the grave's safekeeping. Small apparatuses may be made available to air condition the grave. Every month, electricity will be spent, the bill for which must be paid by the grave's heir, etc., etc.

Yet another board came into view, upon which the rates for washing the body, etc., were entered. Take notice:

Funeral prayer and eulogy: 2 annas

Washing – large corpse: Rs. 1, 4 annas

Washing- small corpse: 14 annas

Wood to heat the water for the corpse: 4 annas

Labour of pouring heating water: 2 annas

Barga for large corpse, per barga: 2 1/2 annas

Barga for small corpse, per *barga*: 4 1/3 annas

(Note: The *barga* is the wooden plank that is placed on top of the corpse in the pit of the grave, so that the earth won't be pressed downward.)⁶

If you go into a good salon, you will see the rates of different things written on this sort of board for the customers' convenience:

Men's haircut: 10 annas

Boys': 4 annas

Womens': Rs. 1

Girls': 8 annas

Shave: 2 annas

Haircut & shave: 9 annas

Shampoo: 2 annas

Haircut, shave & shampoo: 10 annas

If you get a haircut and a shave along with it, then there's a discount of one or two rupees. It's very much possible that in the future the owners of the graveyard will also give some discount to their customers, and this sort of announcement will be made: "Whosoever shall have two large graves dug in a year shall get a small grave dug for free." Or, "Whosoever shall have two graves dug at the same time shall get two rose-cuttings for free." Or, "Whosoever buys all of the goods for shrouding and inhuming from us will get the grave's number embroidered in gold on a beautiful tablet."

It's also possible that our graveyards will become even more progressive in coming times, and there will be advance bookings for graves. That is, we will book a seat in a good and fashionable graveyard for our aged loved ones two or three years in advance so that we won't

⁶ Manto's note.

have to deal with any anxiety when the time comes. Then, there will be new ways of burying and shrouding dead bodies, and therefore it is very likely that this sort of advertisement will be published in the newspaper by gravediggers:

Isa-ji, Musa-ji and Sons, Burial and Shrouding Experts

With the aid of modern instruments, corpses are washed and shrouded without being touched by any hands.

If these sorts of advertisements are published by graveyards as well, no one will be surprised:

THE MOST MODERN GRAVEYARD IN TOWN!

Where the dead sleep just the way you sleep in your elegant beds.

In the city of Bombay there are several organizations right now that arrange the shrouding and burial of corpses. You don't need to go to any trouble, just send a notice to one of these organizations. The organization's men will wash the corpse, clothe it in a shroud, and bury it, and you won't hear anything about it. When everything has been done to your satisfaction, the organization's men will start the funeral procession from your home, take it to the graveyard, and perform the burial there, and you won't hear anything about it. When everything has been done to your satisfaction, this organization will present you with your bill.

You are a very busy man. By chance, death comes along and ambushes your servant. You are very sorry for his death, but you must accompany a number of friends, with whom you have some business links, to the seaside. So, you'll immediately call the manager of some organization, settle the fees and whatnot, and arrange his shrouding and burial. The organization's professional bearers will go along with the funeral procession, and they will proceed from your house, reciting Qur'anic verses in loud voices. There the funeral prayer will be read -- the compensation for which will be included in the bill. And in a large grave, whose

price is Rs. 2, 4 annas, your loyal servant will be buried. You will keep laughing and frolicking contently with your friends by the seaside -- and in the other place too, your servants' grave will be prepared with laughter and frolic. And if you had previously promised to give him a bonus, the organization's men will cover him with a mantle of flowers too.

A few days ago I happened to go that same graveyard. There was a general announcement written on the notice board:

As of June 8, 1942, due to increased expense, the fee for digging graves will be augmented. The fee for digging a large grave is Rs. 1, 4 annas. The fee for digging a small grave is 14 annas.

The war has made graves expensive as well.