

Khoorshit

We had met Khurshid (the Parsees pronounce it as Khoorshit) when we were in Delhi. It so happened that our child was ill and we needed a doctor. One Mr. Keshwala who lived in a flat opposite the building in which we lived referred us to a Doctor named Kapadia who was not far from our residence. We called him. Dr. Kapadia was a man of small frame and also hunchbacked. He spoke Urdu with fine accent for he had been born, brought up and educated in Delhi. Dr. Kapadia visited us three or four times during the illness of our child. His treatment was effective and our child was cured. Now Dr. Kapadia was a noble soul and when we offered him the fees for his services, he declined to accept it. Our acquaintance developed to the level of social relationship and soon my wife and myself started visiting him. During one such visit he introduced us to his son Savak whom we soon found to be extremely sociable. He was employed with SINGER Machine Company and drawing a monthly salary of about six hundred rupees. Savak Kapadia was an amicable, neatly dressed gentleman with an odd factor of complexion which was 'yellowish' which might have been the result of his being anaemic. He had kept his house spick and span and we were now frequent visitors to his house. Usually, we used to go to the Kapadias in the evening.

Khurshid, Savak's wife, always welcomed us with great enthusiasm and treated us with the warmth of hospitality. A tall woman Khurshid had been spared of the oddity of nose the Parsees generally have. Not very good looking she had fair complexion and had bobbed hair that suited her round face and being generally well-dressed she looked pretty. She and my wife became good friends and soon the Savaks also started visiting us and twice or thrice a week would spend long hours chatting with us through the evening.

Whenever we went to Savak's house we would find one more person there. This man was a Sikh, looking healthy and seemed a good-natured fellow. Savak told me that the

Sikh was his childhood friend. His name was Jorawar Sinh. They had read together since childhood and done graduation in Arts. By appearance Sardar Jorawar Sinh looked comparatively older than Savak and perhaps being anaemic Savak looked much smaller than him. While Sardar Jorawar Sinh looked like a man around forty, Savak appeared to be not more than eighteen.

Sardar Jorawar Sinh was a bachelor. It was war time and Jorawar Sinh had got many contracts from the Government. His father was an old government contractor but the father and son did not see eye to eye with each other.

Jorawar Sinh was more of a libertarian and the father and son were not on talking terms. He was, however, the apple of his mother's eye for he was the only son in the family. His other siblings were all girls, three in number. They were all of them married and well settled in life. His mother showered all or her affection on him and treated him as if he was a small child. He was a fondled child. Now his mother had only one desire and it was that Jorawar should also be married but Jorawar was not ready even to talk on that subject.

One day I asked him : "Sardar Sahib why don't you get married ?"

Smiling in the moustache he said, "I'll, but what is the hurry ?"

I asked him, "How old are you ?"

He said, "Guess"

I said, "I feel you're around forty"

Sardar Jorawar Sinh smiled and said, "Wrong."

I said, "Okay, tell me yourself."

Sardar Jorawar Sinh smiled again and said, "I'm much younger than you - even age-wise ... just day before yesterday on 29th August I completed twenty five."

I said, "sorry for the wrong guess... but by your appearance nobody, I feel, would say that you're twenty five."

Sardar Jorawar Sinh laughed, then said, "I'm a Sikh and an exceptional one." Then throwing a close-look at me said, "Manto Sahib why don't you go for a hair-cut ? Aren't you bothered by such long hair ?"

I moved my hand over the neck. It must have been three months ago that I had it cut. Sardar Jorawar Sinh's remark made me conscious of my long hair and suddenly started feeling the burden. I said, "I had forgotten. Since you said it I'm feeling the burden of it. God knows why, but I don't remember going in for it; its bloody sort of a botheration to go to the barber. Its such a nuisance ! Sit an hour before the barber with head bent down..., listen to his rubbish helplessly he would talk about some actress, her affairs, ... he will talk about America having readied the atom-bomb and how Russia has a strong reply to it..... Will say Who is Atlee ? What about Mussolini ? Where is he these days ?" If you tell him he has gone to hell he will ask you further, 'How ? Which way ? Which hell ?' Nonsense !

Having heard me out Sardar Jorawar Sinh removed his white pugree and kept it on the teapoy. I was shocked to see that he had very very short hair as if cut to zero level. But he wore his pugree in such a way that one would feel he had the usual long hair of a Sikh. Seeing me surprised he smiled and said, 'I can't bear hair longer than this'. I made no comments on this; I didn't think it proper. Then he changed the topic of our tete-a-tete which now turned towards Khurshid. He said, "Manto Sahib ! Do something for Khurshid."

I failed to understand this sudden shift in conversation. I asked "Khurshid ? Who ?"

Sardar Jorawar Sinh replaced his pugree on his head and said, "For Khurshid Kapadia."

"What can I do for her ?" I said. "She loves singing so much" he said. I didn't know this. I said, "How does she sing ? Obviously the question was aimed at finding out the

level and quality of her singing, though unintentionally. But that was encouragement enough for Sardar Jorawar Sinh and he went into raptures talking about Khurshid's singing and spoke with such glowing eloquence that I felt it was sheer exaggeration. He said, "Manto Sahib, she has been gifted with such beautiful voice. Especially she sings Thumree so well that you'll be carried away by her rendering. You will feel you are as if listening to Abdul Kareem Khan Sahib. And the most interesting thing is that Khurshid has not been anybody's disciple. Whatever she has got, is endowed upon her by nature. Please come to my house in the evening. Bring Mrs. Manto also with you. I will call Khurshid. Just please listen to her singing once."

"Sure," I said, "I didn't know about her singing."

Then by way of recommendation he said, "you are working with the Radio Station. I wish she gets some programmes every month on the Radio. She is not interested in money". "But if she gets a programme she is bound to be paid for it. Otherwise in which head of account will the government deposit the payment due to her?" I said casually. Upon this Jorawar Sinh smiled and said, "Okay... but please do get her some programmes. I'm sure the listeners will certainly like her singing."

Three days later as usual we went to Savak's house. Savak wasn't there but Jorawar Sinh was there in the drawing room and was smoking. Now smoking is prohibited among Parsees; Sikhs also don't smoke, but here was Jorawar Sinh smoking comfortably puffing off in the great style. As we entered Savak's drawing-room, Jorawar Sinh stopped smoking, rubbed off the cigarette in the ash-tray and saluted us in typical Muslim style. That time came his rejoinder, "Khurshid is not well today."

After a little while Khurshid also came into the drawing-room. I asked her, "How are you? I heard you aren't keeping well."

"A bit of cold" she said spreading her thick lips into a smile.

But that was not true. She was not suffering from cold. Sardar Jorawar Sinh enquired of her well-being with great concern recommended some medicines and referred the names of half-a-dozen doctors. Khurshid quietly listened to him as if she was accustomed to listening to such nonsense. At this moment her husband came in. He was delayed at office and apologised to us, cracked a joke or two with Jorawar Sinh and then excused himself for a few moments disappearing behind the door inside to meet his baby daughter.

This was his baby from his first wife. And their one and only child. She had her father's complexion but had eyes like her mother. Of other features one couldn't say whom after she was. She was a very smiling baby. Savak entered into the drawing-room with her and sat down with her in his lap. He loved her exceedingly. He used to play with her all the time after he was back home from the office. Almost every week he used to buy toys for her. A large glass almirah in his house was filled with toys only.

During the course of chat the conversation turned towards Jorawar Sinh and Savak praised him to the skies. He said to my wife and me, "Sardar Jorawar Sinh is a very old friend of mine. We are child-hood friends. We used to read together. Since first standard to the present day we have been meeting each other everyday. Sometimes I feel we are still at the school only. All this while Sardar Jorawar Sinh just kept smiling while I kept wondering about his short hair under his pugree and my long hair burdening me.

On Sardar Jorawar Sinh's insistence Khurshid had to sing. I found her singing discordant but could not say so openly lest it offended her husband Savak and Sardar Jorawar Sinh. Rather I had perforce to praise her performance. "Good Heavans ! You sing so well !" Sardar Jorawar Sinh clapped loudly and then exclaimed, "Khurshid ! You were wonderful today !" Then turning towards me he said, "She has been

bestowed with the title of AFTAB-e-MOUSIKI – (the Sun of Music) – Manto Sahib.” I

kept quiet but my wife asked, “When ?”

Sardar Jorawar Sinh said, “Bring that cutting from the newspaper, please.”

Khurshid brought the newspaper-cutting. Some six months back, some reporter and a flatterer had gifted the title after listening to her in a private mehfil. I read it and mischievously said to Khurshid, “The title is wrong”. Sardar Jorawar Sinh was taken aback. He asked me, “Why ?” Continuing playing the mischief, I said, “For a woman it should be AFTABA-e-MOUSIKI and not AFTAB-e-MOUSIKI. For Khurshid sahiba it should be AFTABA-e-MOUSIKI and not AFTAB-e-MOUSIKI.”

My joke was lost on everybody. I thought if no one else atleast Sardar Jorawar Sinh would understand it but no, he also failed to see the joke. He smiled and said, “These newspaper reporters often do wrong reporting. You are very right. It should be AFTABA and not AFTAB for Khurshid.”

I thought it wise to remain tight-lipped on this lest my mischief was exposed.

In the meanwhile, Savak appeared lost in other thought. Perhaps lost in the reverie of his friendship with Jorawar Sinh. Suddenly, he said, “Mr. Manto I shall never find a friend like Jorawar Sinh. He has always helped me. He has ever been extremely truthful to me. In the recent past when I was ill and hospitalised, he took care of me better than the nurses. He looked after my home. Khurshid used to be upset and disturbed but he did everything possible to soothe her. He spent hours playing with my daughter. He used to read out newspaper to me. I really cannot even thank him adequately.” Upon Savak’s waxing so eloquently about him Sardar Jorawar Sinh only smiled and said to Khurshid, “Khurshid your husband is being very sentimental today. What have I done that he should be lauding me so much ?” But Savak said, “Stop this nonsense ! I cannot praise you enough. I’m proud of your friendship and

will ever be proud. From childhood to this day you have remained constant. There has never been any variation in your behaviour with me.”

I looked at Sardar Jorawar Sinh. He was listening to the praise being showered upon him as if he was listening to the news on the Radio. When Savak had done his talking he asked me, “So Khurshid will get programmes on the Radio, won’t she ?”

I was startled by this sudden question from him and said, “I’ll try.”

Sardar Jorawar Sinh was puzzled to hear my reply. He said, “Try, you mean to say you’ll have to try to get her programmes. This is too much. Tomorrow morning you take her with you to the Radio station. I’m sure on listening to her the music director will offer her at least two programmes this month only.”

I didn’t think it proper to say something that would break his heart and so said, “Definitely.” Khurshid, however, said to Jorawar Sinh, “I cannot go in the morning. I’ve to take care of the baby. I can make it only in the afternoon.” Thereupon turning towards me Sardar Jorawar Sinh said, “Manto Sahib the baby really keeps her engaged in the morning. One of these days I will myself bring Khurshid to the Radio station in the afternoon.”

However, that could not happen. For quite sometime I had been toying with the idea of moving to Bombay. The very next day I took the decision to give up my job on the Radio station in Delhi and I resigned and moved to Bombay. Since I had left Delhi suddenly I had to leave alone. My wife followed me to Bombay after some days. Gradually, Mr. Kapadia, Ms. Khurshid Kapadia and Sardar Jorawar Sinh faded out of our memory. We forgot them.

In Bombay I had taken up a job with a film company. One day due to illness I had not gone to the office. Next day when I reached my office, the gatekeeper gave me a piece

of paper and said, "yesterday one sahib had come here to see you. He has left this for you." It was a brief note from Jorawar Sinh which read, "My wife and I had come to see you but you weren't there. We are staying at Taj Hotel. If you could come we will be delighted to meet you. Please do bring Mrs. Manto also along with you." He had given the room number. That very evening my wife and I reached Hotel Taj. It was no problem to find out the room in which they were staying as Jorawar Sinh had given the room number in the note. Sardar Jorawar Sinh was there in the room combing his zero-level harsh-hair. As we entered, he welcomed us with great gusto. My wife was exceedingly eager to meet his wife so she asked, "Sardar Sahib where is your wife?"

Sardar Jorawar Sinh smiled as usual and said, "she'll be here soon. She is in the bathroom. He had hardly finished saying it when from the other room Khurshid appeared before us. My wife got up. Embraced her and then asked, "How is the baby Khurshid?" "She is fine" said Khurshid. My wife then asked her, "Where is Savak?" Khurshid however kept mum. The two sat down. I then said to Sardar Jorawar Sinh, "Sardar Sahib, why don't you show us your wife now?" Sardar Jorawar Sinh threw his characteristic smile and then turning towards Khurshid said to her, "Khurshid, just show them my wife."

Khurshid looked at my wife, smiled and said, "I've married Sardar Jorawar Sinh. We are here on honey-moon."

My wife was shocked and disillusioned by this revelation. She just did not know how to react to this. Failing to say anything further upon this she got up and holding my hand said, "Come on Saadat Sahab let's move out of here, and we left their room in a huff. God knows what Sardar Jorawar Sinh and Khurshid might have thought and said about our insolence, our misdemeamour.

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Saadat Hasan Manto

Considered most popular and important story writer of Urdu and Hindi Saadat Hasan Manto was gifted with a very short life of about forty years; but in this brief span he wrote stories that have not yet found any rivals.

Born in Ludhiyana, educated at Amritsar and Aligarh, Manto made his way to Mumbai to work in the film industry as a dialogue writer. He also worked with Prabhat Talkies. In 1948 he migrated to Pakistan and died in 1955.

Manto was a born story-teller-nay- he was born to write stories. Story-writing came easily to him and he was always in full control of what he was portraying and presenting. Whether they are stories on partition, on riots or stories presenting characters with moral lapses, rather wilfully involved in illegal traits of behaviour, Manto knows what he wants to show and that done he finishes off with them. And what variety of characters he has presented ! A large number of his characters are people who are involved in immoral acts. Manto is no preacher. He does not idealise anything, any trends. He just presents his characters as they are. And Manto does not waste his energy in depicting the background of his characters, or backdrop of things like nature, social set-up and so on. As you read his stories, for that matter, any of his stories, you are straightaway dealing with the persons in the story.

Manto wrote at a time when India was awakening to her freedom and the struggle for freedom was at its fiercest. But Indian mind-set was yet very very conservative, very very orthodox. Those were times when even married couples would hesitate to talk and move freely in the presence of elders. Sex was a taboo. It was an activity to be performed in the darkness of night but it does not mean that men and women did not succumb to moral lapses involving sex. They did it privately and wore the moral facade publicly. Hypocrisy indeed ! Manto's characters are plain human beings with

their good and bad making no efforts to hide anything. You love them and respect them. Even prostitutes are raised to a level of dignity by him. You would sympathise with Sharada in the same way you would with Toba Tek Sinh.

Manto dealt with the physical aspect of relations between men and women so openly that no wonder the charge of obscenity was levied upon him. He was charge-sheeted, arrested, jailed; for he had written things which were forbidden in the conservative society. He was charged with committing moral offence. Even Lawrence's Lady Chatterley's lover was banned in India on the same ground. Yet it cannot be denied that his stories like THANDA GOSHT present very truthfully some aspects involving sexual activity between man and woman. How many have the courage to admit of such things, confess about such things ? We would not. We continue to wear the cloak of hypocrisy. Manto was no angel. Good, he was not. An angel would bind you in a frame of belief. Manto was far ahead of his times. Manto makes you see human beings like us as they are. Perhaps that is what make him an engaging story-teller who would easily rank among the best in the world.
