

Saadat Hasan Manto's

**'Black Trousers'**

Translated by

**Nayeem Ahmad Shah\***

Before coming to Delhi, she was in Anbala cantonment where many whites were her clients. It was because of the interaction with these whites that she had learned ten to fifteen sentences of English. She wouldn't use them in common conversation. But when she came to Delhi and her business did not flourish, then one day she said to her neighbour Tamncha Jan: 'This life, very bad'...(This life is very bad. We get nothing to feed our belly.)

In Anbala cantonment her business was flourishing very nicely. The whites of the cantonment used to come to her after drinking alcohol and she would entertain eight or ten whites in three or four hours only. These whites were much better than her compatriots. There was no doubt that they spoke such a language which Sultana couldn't comprehend but their ignorance of her language proved to be very good for her. If they wanted some concessions from her, she would shake her head and say: "*Saahib, Hamari samaj main tumhari baat nahi aata*(Sir, I do not understand you.) If they teased her too much, she would start abusing them in her own language. She would look at their face in amazement and she would say to them: "*Saahab tum ek dum uloo ka pattha ha. Haramzada ha....Samja*"(Sir, you are a bumpkin out and out...bastard...Understood!") When she said this, she wouldn't make her tone jarring but she would talk mildly and with great love. The whites would laugh and while laughing, they seemed to Sultana like bumpkins.

Ever since she came to Delhi, not a single white approached her. She had been living in this city of India for three months, where he had heard that there lived barons who go to Shimla in summers. Only six men came to her. Only six, that is, two in a month. And from these six men, to tell the truth, she earned eighteen and a half rupees. Nobody would agree on more than three rupees. It is strange that each of them said the same thing, "We will not give a penny more than three rupees". Who knows what was the matter that each of them considered her worth only three rupees. When the sixth person came, she said to him categorically : "Look, I will take three rupees for one time. There will not be the concession of single penny. Now, if you agree stay, else go." The sixth one did not haggle and stayed with her. When he closed the door in the next room and started taking off his coat, Sultana said, "Give one rupee for milk also." He didn't give her one rupee but he took out of his pocket a glittering fifty paisa coin and offered it to her. She accepted it thinking that something is better than nothing.

Eighteen and half in three months. The monthly rent of the room was twenty rupees to which the landlord called flat in English. There was such a toilet in this flat in which all the dirt would disappear in a pipe at the bottom due to the force of water, after pulling the chain. This

would emanate a lot of noise. In the beginning, this noise scared her a lot. On the first day, when she went to the toilet for defecation, she had a severe back pain. For getting up, she clasped the chain for support. Looking at the chain, she thought that since this house is specially designed for their accommodation, this chain has been put in place so that there would be no pain while getting up but as soon as she wanted to grab the chain for getting up, a clattering noise emanated from upside and then the water came out with such force that she screamed out of fear.

Khuda Bakhsh was fixing his photography equipment in the next room and was putting Hydroquinone in a clean bottle when he heard Sultana screaming. He ran out and asked Sultana: "What happened ? Was that scream yours?"

Sultana's heart was pounding. She said, "What is this? Is it toilet or something else and why is this chain in the middle like that of trains. I had a backache and thought I would hold it for getting up. As I touched it, there was an explosion which is beyond narration."

Khuda Bakhsh laughed a lot at this incident. He had already told Sultana everything about the toilet that it was of the latest fashion, in which only after pulling the chain all the dirt would sink into the earth.

How Khuda Bakhsh and Sultana came together is a long story. Khuda Bakhsh was from Rawalpindi. After passing an entrance examination, he had to drive a truck. So for four years he worked as a lorry driver between Rawalpindi and Kashmir. After that, in Kashmir, he befriended a woman. He married her and brought her with him. Since he did not get any job in Lahore. Therefore, he put the woman in the profession of whores. This process continued for two to three years. Then that woman eloped with someone else. Khuda Bakhsh found out that she was in Ambala. He went in search for her and came across Sultana. Sultana liked him and they came together.

With the arrival of Khuda Bakhsh, the business of Sultana started to flourish. Since she was a woman with weak faith, she thought that Khuda Bakhsh is a fortunate fellow on whose arrival there was such advancement.

Therefore, this good faith raised the prestige of Khuda Bakhsh in her eyes even more.

He was a workaholic man. He did not like to sit and keep his fingers crossed. He befriended a photographer outside the railway station, who would take pictures with Mint-Camera. From him he learned photography. Then he bought a camera for sixty rupees which he borrowed from Sultana. Gradually he made a curtain, bought two chairs and took all the photo-washing equipment and started his work separately.

It worked. So he set up his camp at Ambala cantonment shortly after. Here he would take photos of the whites. Within a month, he acquainted several whites of Ambala cantonment. He took Sultana there. Here in the cantonment, through Khuda Bakhsh, several whites became regular customers of Sultana.

Sultana bought ear rings for herself, made eight bangles of five and a half tolas<sup>1</sup>, collected ten or fifteen good saris and furniture also arrived in the house. In nutshell, she was very happy in Anbala cantonment.

All of a sudden, Khuda Bakhsh decided to go to Delhi. How could Sultana deny as she considered Khuda Bakhsh very auspicious for herself. She gladly agreed to accompany him. On the contrary, she thought that in such a big city where barons live, it would be even better and her business would also flourish. She had already heard her two friends praising Delhi. Then there was the monastery of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya with which she had great devotion. So she hurriedly sold her household goods and came to Delhi with Khuda Bakhsh. Arriving here, Khuda Bakhsh took a flat on rent for twenty rupees per month in which both of them started living.

A row of new houses of the same type were built alongside the road. The municipal committee had earmarked this part of the city exclusively for prostitutes so that they would not set up bases in various places in the city. On the shops, were housed two storey residential flats. Since all the buildings were of the same design, in the beginning, Sultana used to take a lot of time to find her flat. But when the laundryman downstairs put his board on the front side of the house, she found a sign "Clothes are washed here". As soon as she read this board, she would find her flat. In the same way, she had established many other signs, for example, where the word "coal shop" was written in bold letters, there lived her friend Heera Bai, who also sings in Radio House every now and then. Where "food is served for the nobles" was written, her other friend Mukhtar used to live. On the factory of Niwad lived Anwari who served the owner of the factory.

Anwari lived in the factory of Niwad, who was also employed by Seth at the factory. Since Seth had to take care of his factory at the time of night, he mostly stayed with Anwari.

As soon as they would open the shop, only a few customers would come. So when Sultana was idle for a month, she consoled herself a bit, but when two months passed and no one came to her room, she became very worried and said to Khuda Bakhsh: "What is the matter, it's been two months now that nobody has come to visit us. I don't think there is market these days."

Khuda Bakhsh had been brooding on this for a long time. He was silent, but when Sultana herself broke the ice, he said: "I have been thinking about this for many days. I came to the conclusion that due to the war, people got lost in the fog and forgot the way leading here...or it could be..." He was about to add more that they heard the sound of someone going upstairs.

Both Khuda Bakhsh and Sultana were attracted towards the noise. After sometime there was a knock at the door. Khuda Bakhsh leapt and opened the door. An man entered. This was the first customer for whom a bargain was set for three rupees. After that, five more arrived. Six in three months from whom Sultan procured eighteen and half rupees.

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<sup>1</sup> Tola: An ancient unit of weight. Today, a tola is equivalent to 11.7g in the metric system.

Twenty rupees would go in the monthly rent of the flat only not to talk of the water tax and electricity. Other than that, the other expenses of the house, eating, clothes, medicine and liquor and there was no income. If eighteen and a half rupees come in three months, that cannot be called income. Sultana became dejected.

The eight bangles of five and a half *tolas* which she had made in Ambala, were slowly and slowly sold out. When it came the turn of last bangle, she said to Khuda Bakhsh: "Listen to me and let's go back to Anbala. What is the point in living here? Maybe, but this city didn't suit us. Your work too was going well there. Come, Lets go there. Whatever was lost, assume it the charity of your head. Go and sell this bangle. I will tie the belongings and keep them ready. Lets depart in the bus scheduled for tonight..."

Khuda Bakhsh took the bangle in his hand and said, "No darling. We'll not go to Ambala. We will live and earn here. All your bangles will come back. Pin your faith in Allah. He is a great benefactor. He will make a way out". Sultana kept mum. So, the last bangle also came out of her hand. Looking at the lonely hands, she would feel very dejected. What would she do, she had to fill her stomach with some trick?

When five months passed and her income was still less than a quarter of her earlier income, Sultana's perplexity increased. Khuda Bakhsh too would go missing from home for whole day. Sultana was saddened by this also. There is no doubt that she had two or three acquaintances in the neighbourhood with whom she could kill time. But she would consider it utterly bad to visit them every single day and sit for hours. So slowly and gradually, she stopped visiting those friends. She would sit in her desolate house all day. Sometimes she would sew her old and tattered clothes and sometimes she would come out to the balcony, would stand by the fence and would stare aimlessly for hours at the stationary and moving locomotives in the front railway shed.

On the other side of the road was a warehouse of goods spread from one corner to another. On the right hand side there were huge protuberances under the roof of iron and there were the heaps of all types of commodities on the floor. On the left hand side was an open field on which countless railway tracks were lain. Due to sunlight these railway tracks would glitter and Sultana would look at her hands on which the blue veins used to appear raised just like those railway tracks. In this long and open field the engines and locomotives were plying all the time from here and there. The noise of these engines and vehicles was always resounding. When she would get up early in the morning and would come to the balcony, she would see a strange sight. In the fog, the thick smoke from the mouths of the engines looked like thick and heavy men soaring in the sky. The big clouds of steam would also emanate from these railway tracks along with noise and would immerse in the air in the twinkling of an eye. Whenever she would come across a coach of a train which has been deserted after pushed out by the engine, she would relate it to her life. She would think that she has also been pushed out and deserted on the track of the life by someone and she is marching ahead spontaneously...God knows where? Then a day will come when the force of will gradually cease and she will halt at a place unfamiliar to her.

For hours at a stretch, she would stare aimlessly at the crisscrossed railway tracks and at the stationary and moving engines. But all sorts of thoughts kept coming to her mind. When she lived in Anbala cantonment, her house was near the station, but she had never looked at such things there with such curiosity. Now the thoughts come to her mind often that the network of railway tracks with steam and smoke rising from place to place appeared like a huge brothel. There are many vehicles which are being pushed here and there by a few robust engines. These appeared to her like barons who used to visit her when she used to be in Ambala. Then, whenever she saw some engine slowly passing by a line of vehicles, it seemed to her as if a man, from a market of brothel was glancing at whorehouses.

Sultana would gather that brooding on such things would result in mental deterioration. So whenever such thoughts crossed her mind she quitted going to the balcony. She said to Khudha Bakhsh time and again, "Look, have mercy on me, stay at home. I keep sitting in the house like an ailing person all day. But every time he consoled her by saying: "Darling! I am concerned about earning something outside. If God willed, within few days our effort will bring fruits."

Five months had passed, but neither Sultana's nor Khudha Bakhsh's efforts reached to fruition. Muharram was approaching but Sultana had no black clothes to wear. Mukhtar had got tailored a new fashioned shirt of Lady Hamilton the sleeves of which were made of black georgette. She owned a matching black-silk trousers which glittered like mascara. Anwari had bought a fine georgette saree and had told Sultana that she would wear white boski- petticoat underneath the saree because it was the latest fashion. Along with that saree, Anwari had brought a black velvet shoes which was very exquisite. When Sultana saw all these things, she was saddened by the realization that she could not afford to buy such clothes for celebrating Muharram.

After having a look at the clothes of Anwari and Mukhtar, when Sultan reached home, she was very dejected. She felt as if an abscess had formed inside her. The house was completely empty. Khuda Bakhsh was out as usual. For a long time she would lay on mat resting her head on the circular pillow. But when due to height, her neck stiffened, she went outside in balcony merely to remove the melancholy thoughts from her mind.

In the front, on the tracks, there were the train coaches but no engine. It was evening. Water had been sprayed so the dust had settled down. There were such people in the bazaar who used to go to their houses quietly after looking stealthily here and there. One such man raised his head and looked at Sultana. Sultana smiled at him and forgot him because an engine had appeared in the front tracks. Sultana started looking at the engine carefully and slowly an idea came to her mind that the engine also wore black clothes. To get this uncanny idea out of her mind, when she looked towards the road, she saw the same man standing next to a bullock cart who had looked at her with lustful eyes. Sultana waved at him. The man looked around and with a gratifying gesture asked, "Where should I come from?" Sultana showed him the way and he came upstairs with a great haste.

Sultan made him sit at the window. When he sat down, Sultana, in order to initiate the conversation asked him, " Why were you afraid to come up?" After listening to it, the man smiled: " How did you know.What was the point of being afraid?" On this Sultan said, " I said this because you stood there for a long time. Then only after meditating on something came here.

After hearing this he smiled again, "You have a misconception. I was looking at the flat which is above yours. There stood a woman dodging and showing thumb to a man. I liked the scene. Then a bulb lit blue in the balcony. So I stayed there for sometime because I like green light as it is pleasing for the eyes.

After saying so, he began to inspect the room. Then he stood up. Sultana asked: "Are you going?" The man replied: "No, I want to see your house."

"Come, show me all the rooms ." Sultana showed him the three rooms one by one. The man inspected these rooms very quietly. When they returned to the room where they had been sitting earlier, the man said, "My name is Shankar." Sultana looked at Shankar for the first time keenly. He was of medium height with modest appearance, but his eyes were extraordinarily clear and transparent. Sometimes, a strange kind of brilliance would emerge from them. He had a muscular and athletic body. His hair was white on the temples. He wore warm gray trousers and a white shirt with a raised collar.

Shankar sat on the mat in such a way that it seemed that Sultana was the customer instead of Shankar. This feeling perturbed Sultana a little.

So she said to Shankar: "Speak up."

Shankar was seated but after listening to this, laid down and said: "What can I say? You say something. You called me..."

When Sultana did not say anything, he raised himself and said, " I understand ...Now listen to me. What you have understood is wrong. I am not one of those people who pay something. Like doctors, I also have fees. When I am called, I am necessarily paid fee..."

After listening to it Sultana laughed a lot, "What is the work you do?"

Shankar replied, " The same thing you people do!"

"What?"

"What work you do?"

"I ...I don't do anything."

" I don't do anything either."

Sultana said ....., "That is not done.... You must be doing something?"

Shankar also replied calmly, " You also must be doing something"

"I sit idle."

"I also sit idle."

"...Come let's do nothing, both of us."

" I am present, but I don't pay for doing nothing"

" Talk sensibly...this is not a almshouse."

" and I am not a volunteer either."

Sultana halted now and asked, "Who are these volunteers?"

"Simpletons..." ,Shankar replied.

" I am not a simpleton...."

"But that man, Khuda Bakhsh, who lives with you is indeed a simpleton."

"Why?"

"That is because for some days he is on an errand to such a pious ascetic to open his luck, whose luck is closed like a rusty lock." Saying this, Shankar laughed.

Sultana said, " You are a Hindu that is why you make fun of our saints."

Shankar smiled, " At such places, the questions of Hindus and Muslims do not arise . Even if the big *pandiths*<sup>2</sup> or *molvies*<sup>3</sup> come here, they will become gentle fellows."

"God knows what ridiculous words your are saying ....Say, will you stay?"

"On that very condition I told you earlier..."

Sultana stood up and said, "Then go and find your way...."

Shankar stood up comfortably. While leaving and putting his hands in the pockets of his pants, he said, "I pass through this market sometimes. Call me whenever you need me. I am a very experienced man."

Shankar left and Sultana forgot her black dress and kept thinking about it for a long time. The man's words eased her grief. If he had come to Anbala where she was happy, she would have seen this man in a different way and most likely he would have been pushed out. But since she was very sad here, she liked Shankar's words.

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<sup>2</sup> An Individual with specialised knowledge especially in Hinduism.

<sup>3</sup> A Muslim doctor of law who ministers to the religious needs of others.

When Khuda Bakhsh turned up in the evening, Sultana asked him, "Where were you missing for the whole day?"

Shankar was getting dog tired and said, " I came from the area of old fort. A pious man has been staying over there for some days. I go to him every single day so that our lucky days would come..."

"Did he say anything to you?"

"No, he hasn't turned kind yet....but Sultana, the way I serve them will never go wasted. With the grace of Allah, we will prosper by leaps and bounds."

The idea of celebrating Muharram was on Sultana's mind. She said to Khuda Bakhsh sobbingly : "You stay away for the whole day ..." I live in a cage here. Neither I can go nor I can come from anywhere. The Muharram is approaching. Do you care that I need black clothes also. There is not even a penny in the house. There were bangles only. They were sold one by one. Now you tell me what will happen . How long will you wander around these poor pious men? It seems to me that here in Delhi, God has turned away from us. Listen to me. Start your work . At least that will help."

Khuda Bakhsh lay down on the mat and said: "But if you want to start the work, a little bit money is also needed. For God's sake don't speak about such depressing things. I can't stand it anymore. I really committed a blunder by leaving Ambala. But whatever God does, He does for our good. Who knows after enduring hardships and.... Sultana interrupted, " Do something for God's sake. Beg borrow or steal, but get me a piece of black cloth for trousers. A white boski-shirt is with me. I will get that dyed. I have white nylon scarf with me also. The one you gave me on Diwali. This will also get dyed with the shirt. The only thing I lack are the trousers. You get that arranged by hook or crook...Look, you take oath on me! Get that arranged anyhow..."

Khuda Bakhsh raised himself and sat, " Now you keep on pressing for no reason. Where from will I get that...I don't have a penny even to eat opium."

Food arrived from hotel. Both of them slept as an antidote. Morning came and Khudha Bakhsh went to the sage of the old fort and Sultana was left alone. She lied down for some time and slept for some time and kept strolling here and there in the rooms. After lunch she took out her white nylon dupatta and white boski-shirt and gave them to the laundryman for dying. Clothes were getting washed and dyed there. After doing that work she came back and read the books about films wherein were the stories and songs of the films she had watched. While reading such books she felt asleep. When she woke up, it was four because the sun had reached near the horizon. After bathing she wrapped herself in a warm blanket and came and stood in the balcony. She remained standing in the balcony for approximately one hour. It was already evening and bulbs were being lit.

Down on the road, one could see the signs of magnificence. There was some respite from the intensity of the cold but Sultana didn't seem affected by it. She was looking at the tangas and



vehicles coming and going on the roads for some time. All of a sudden she sighted Shankar. Reaching near the house he raised his neck and looked at Sultana and smiled. Sultana involuntarily waved at him and called him upstairs.

When Shankar came up, Sultana was in a fix because she didn't know what she should say to him. Basically she had waved at him just for the sake of calling without pondering over it. Shankar was very much comfortable as if it was his own house. Therefore, without much formalities, like the first day, he put the bolster pillow under his head and lay himself down.

When Sultana didn't talk for a long time, he said, " You could call me hundred times and show me the door hundred times. I never get offended by such things. "

Sultana said feeling agitated, "No. Sit, who asks you to go?" Shankar smiled at this, " So my conditions are acceptable to you."

"What conditions?" Sultana asked laughingly. "Are you going to marry me?"

"What *nikah*<sup>4</sup> and what marriage! Neither you will marry nor I. These rites are not for we people. Leave that trash away. Let's be sensible.

Tell me, what should I say?"

"You are a woman...you start something which will console our hearts for some time. There are not only shopkeepers and shopkeepers, there is something more also."

Sultana had now made her mind to accept Shankar . "Say clearly what you demand from me."

"What others demand?"

Shankar raised himself and said, "What is then the difference between you and others?"

"There is no difference between you and me. But there is the huge difference between me and them." They talked a lot like this.

"There are many things that should not be asked, should be understood." Sultana tried to understand Shankar's words for a while. Then she said: "I am ready. So tell me, what is your intention?"

"You won. But I would say, to this day no one would have accepted such a thing. "

"You are wrong. In this ward, you will come across such senseless women also who will never believe that a woman can accept such humiliation which you have been accepting without any feeling but despite their disbelief you are present in thousands. Isn't your name Sultana?"

"Sultana it is."

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<sup>4</sup> the contract of marriage in Muslim religion.

Shankar stood up and began laughing: " My name is Shankar. Even these names are uncanny and worthless. Come on. Let's get inside."

Shankar and Sultana came back in the first room, then both of them were laughing on something.

When Shankar was about to leave, Sultana said, "Shankar, will you accept one of my words?" Shankar replied: "Tell me the words first."

Sultana felt ashamed and said: "You will say that I want to receive the price but..."

"Say...go ahead...why did you stop", Shankar said.

Sultana said courageously, "The thing is that Muharram is approaching and I don't have enough money for black trousers. You have already listened to the woebegone tales existing here."

I had a shirt and two scarves which I sent for dyeing today. On hearing this, Shankar said, "You want me to give you some money so that you can make black trousers."

Sultana immediately said: "No, I mean if you can bring for me black trousers."

Shankar smiled, " I rarely have something in my pocket. I will try anyway. On the first date of Muharam you will get the trousers. So now, aren't you happy?" Then looking at Sultana's bangles he asked, "Can you give me these bangles?" Sultana laughed and said, " What will you do with them. These are ordinary bangles of silver. They will hardly cost five rupees. "On this Shankar said: "I have asked you for bangles. I have not asked their price. Tell me, will you give ...."

"Take them." saying this she Sultana took off her bangles and gave them to Shankar.

Then she regretted but Shankar had left. Sultana was not sure that Shakar would fulfil his promise but eight days later on the first day of Muharam there was a knock at the door at nine o'clock in the morning. When Sultana opened the door Shankar was standing. He handed the thing wrapped in a newspaper to Sultana and said: "These are black trousers...check them if they are long enough...Now I am leaving..."

Shankar gave the trousers and left without saying anything to Sultana. There were wrinkles on his pants. The hair was scattered. It was as if he had just woke up and came straight here.

Sultana opened the paper and the black trousers were there. Just like she had seen with Mukhtar. Sultana was very happy. She was sorry for the bangles and this deal, but these trousers and Shankar's fulfilling his promise took that feeling away .

At two o'clock in the afternoon, she brought her dyed shirt and scarf from the laundry man downstairs . When she put on all the three black clothes, there was a knock at the door.

Sultana opened the door and Mukhtar entered. She looked at Sultana's three garments and said, "It seems that shirt and scarf have been dyed, but the trousers are new...when you got them tailored?"

Sultana replied: "This was brought by the tailor today only. Saying this she looked at ears of Mukhtar, "Where did you bought these bangles from"?"

Mukhtar replied, "I bought them today only..."

The two had to remain mum for some time.

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#### **About the Author:**

Saadat Hasan Manto(1912-1955) was a prolific writer and playwright who unveiled the naked truths of the society that no one dared to talk about. He wrote twenty two collections of short stories, a novel, five series of radio plays three collections of essays and two collections of personal sketches. He chronicled the chaos that prevailed during and after the partition of India in 1947.He was charged with obscenity six times in India and Pakistan for his writings.

His first work was *Tamasha* based on the Jallianwala Bagh massacre at Amritsar, India. His earlier works were influenced by the progressive writers of his times which showed a marked leftist and socialist leanings, and his later works portrayed the darkness of human psyche as human values progressively declined around the partition. His best short stories are held in high esteem by the literary circles. He vehemently opposed the partition of India the glimpses of which can be seen in *Mozail*, *Naya Qanoon*, *Toba Tek Singh* etc. He died on 18 January 1955 in Lahore, Punjab, West Pakistan.

#### **About Translator:**

\*Nayeem Ahmad Shah earned his Masters degree in English from University of Kashmir in 2011. Besides being a regular contributor to various English Journals, he has many newspaper articles, book reviews and poems to his credit. His areas of interest are Translation Studies and Postcolonial Literature. He has also translated Saadat Hassan Manto's shorty story "Mozail". He is presently serving as Assistant Professor of English in Higher Education Department, UT of J & K. He can be reached at nayeem.eng.ku@gmail.com.