

## LICENSE

A short story by Saadat Hasan Manto in Urdu

Translated into English by  
**Nayeem Ahmad Shah**

Abu Coachman was a very happy-go-lucky man. In the city, his coach and horse was number one. He would never ferry ordinary passengers. His customers were regular from whom he would earn ten to fifteen rupees daily which would suffice for him. Unlike other coachmen, he wasn't involved in drugs. But he was too interested in wearing neat clothes and always being stylish.

Whenever his coach passed on some road with the jingling of hooves, all the eyes would go to him automatically. They would remark, "See how arrogantly he sat. Look at his turban. How tilted it is!"

When Abu would hear such words from the people, his neck would straighten and the gait of his horse would also become captivating. Abu would hold the reigns of his horse with such dexterity as if there was no need to hold them. It seemed that the horse was going without directions and he didn't need the order of his owner. Sometimes it seemed that Abu and his horse Chinni were one. The whole coach was a life force and who could be that life force, if not Abu?

Those passengers whom Abu wouldn't accept would curse him in their heart of hearts. Some would wish him ill: "May God break his arrogance. May his coach fall in some river!"

On Abu's lips, which were shadowed a bit by his mustaches, would dance a smile of self-confidence. Looking at this many coachmen would burn with envy. In an attempt to copy Abu, several coachmen had their coaches made after taking loans from here and there. They embellished them with the brass fittings but they couldn't match the style of Abu. The clients who were fans of Abu and his coach would never board their coaches.

Abu was dozing off on his coach under the shade of a tree one afternoon when a voice rang in his ears. Abu opened his eyes. A woman was standing near the coach. Abu looked at her only once, but her extreme youth instantly pierced his heart. She wasn't a woman but a young girl of sixteen or seventeen years. She was slim but strong. Her skin was dark but radiant. She wore silver hoops in her ears. Her hair was parted in the middle and she had a pointed nose on whose

summit was a small bright beauty spot. She wore a long *kurta*<sup>1</sup>, a blue shirt, and a light shawl over her head.

The girl asked in a youthful voice, “What will you charge for the *teshan*<sup>2</sup>?”

Mischief played on the smiling lips of Abu, “Nothing.”

The girl’s face reddened, “What you will charge for the *teshan*, she repeated. Abu let his eyes linger on her and said, “What should I take from you, fortunate one? Come, sit in the coach.”

With trembling hands, the girl tried to conceal her breasts which were already hidden, and said, “What things you say!”

Abu smiled, “Come on, sit. I will take whatever you give me.”

The girl thought for a moment and stepped on the footboard and climbed in. “Take me quickly to the *teshan*.”

Abu looked back, “In a hurry? Gorgeous?”

After some chat, the girl stopped talking. The carriage went on and on and kept moving. Many streets passed below the horse’s hooves. The girl sat fretfully in the back. On the Abu’s lips danced a mischievous smile. When it was too late, the girl said in a frightened voice, “*Teshan* hasn’t come yet?” Abu replied meaningfully, “That will come. My *Teshan* and yours is the same.”

“What do you mean?” the girl asked.

Abu turned to look at her and said, “You’re not such innocent, surely. My *teshan* and yours are the same. It became one the moment Abu first set eyes on you. I swear on your life. I am your slave. I wouldn’t lie.”

The girl adjusted the shawl on her head. Her eyes showed that she understood Abu’s meaning. Her face also showed that she hadn’t taken his words ill. But she was brooding over this dilemma. Abu and her station might well be the same; Abu was certainly smart and well-dressed but was he faithful too?

Should she abandon her station from which, in any case, her train had long departed, for his?

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<sup>1</sup> A kind of tunic, or long, collarless top.

<sup>2</sup>Railway Station

The horse was prancing along happily; the air was cold; the trees lining the street raced by; their branches swooned; there was no sound except the ringing of the bells. Abu, head cocked, was fantasizing about kissing the dark beauty. After some time, he tied the horse's reins to the dashboard and with a jump, landed in the back seat next to the girl. She remained silent. Abu took hold of her hands in his. "Put your reins in my hands!"

The girl said only two words: "Enough now." But Abu instantly put his arms around her. She resisted. Her heart was beating hard and fast as if it wanted to leave her and fly.

"This coach and horse is dearer to me than my life, " Abu said softly, slowly, and affectionately. But I swear on the 11<sup>th</sup> *Pir*<sup>3</sup> that I will sell it and have gold bangles made for you. I will wear old and tattered clothes but I will keep you like a queen. I swear on the one, omnipresent God that this is the first love of my life. If you are not mine, I will slit my throat in front of you. Then he let go of the girl and moved away. "I don't know what has happened to me today. Come on, I will take you to the *Teshan*."

"No, now you have touched me."

Abu lowered his head. "Forgive me. I made a mistake."

"Will you honor this mistake? " There was a challenge in the voice of the girl. As if someone had challenged Abu, "Can you take your coach ahead of mine?" Abu raised his lowered head. His eyes glistened.

"Fortunate one." Saying this, he put his hand on his sturdy chest and said, "Abu will give his life."

The girl brought forward her hand, "So this is my hand."

Abu clasped her hand firmly. "I swear on my youth. I am your slave."

On the next day, Abu and that girl got married. She was from Gujarat, the daughter of a cobbler and her name was Nesti. She had come there with her relatives. They were waiting for her at the station. The love of Abu and the girl crossed all the stages of love in the twinkling of an eye. Both were extremely jubilant. Abu didn't sell his horse and carriage to have the gold bangles made for her. But he spent his savings to buy gold earrings and silk clothes for her.

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<sup>3</sup> In Sufism, a *Pir*'s role is to guide and instruct his disciples on the Sufi path.

His heart danced when Nesti appeared before him, her silk skirt swishing from side to side. “I swear on the *Five Pure Ones*<sup>4</sup>, there is no one in the world as beautiful as you.” With this, he would press her against his chest. “You are the queen of my heart.”

The two were immersed in the pleasures of youth. They sang, laughed, went on walks, and swore fidelity to each other. A month passed like this when suddenly one morning the police arrested Abu. A kidnapping case was registered against him. Nesti stood by him firmly, unwaveringly protesting his innocence, but despite that, Abu was sentenced to two years’ imprisonment. When the court gave its verdict, Nesti wrapped her arms around Abu. I will sit at home and wait for you.”

Abu gently touched her stomach. ‘Bless you. I’ve given the horse and carriage to Dina. Carry on taking the rent from him.’”

Nesti’s parents put great pressure on her, but she didn’t go back to them. Tiring at last, they gave up on her and left her to her lot. Nesti began to live alone. Dena would give her some bucks. She also received the money that had accrued during the court case.

Abu and Nesti met once a week at the jail, meetings which were always too brief for them. Whatever amount of money was accumulated with Nesti was used for the comfort of Abu. Once, In a meeting, Abu looked at the bare ears of Nesti and asked, “Where are the earrings Nesti?” Nesti smiled and looked towards police officer and said, “They were lost somewhere.”

Abu became angry a bit and said, “You should not take too much care of me. In whatever condition I am, I am all right.”

Nesti didn’t say anything. Meeting time ended. She smiled a bit and left. But after she reached home she wept bitterly, shed tears for hours together because Abu’s health condition was deteriorating. In this meeting, she couldn’t even recognize him. The robust Abu is now pinning away. Nesti would surmise that he is pinning away because of their separation and sorrow. But she was unmindful of the fact that he got this disease called asthma from his ancestors. Abu’s brother was more robust than him. But this disease sent him to his grave in the prime of his youth. Abu was himself unaware of this fact. So, in the jail, he told in a sorrowful tone to Nesti, “Had I come to know that I would die too early, then I swear on the one, Omnipresent God I would have never made you my wife. I have been too callous to you. Forgive me and look my hallmark is my coach and horse. Take care of them. Stroke Chinni on the head and tell him that Abu sends his love.

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<sup>4</sup> Muhammad (SAW), Ali (AS), Fatima (RA), Al-Hasan (RA), Al-Hussain (RA). The belief of five pure ones is the belief of only Shias and *Ahlul Sunnat* are not in any way connected with it.

Abu died. Everything of Nesti died. But she was a courageous woman. Somehow she recovered from the trauma. She would remain in the house all alone. In the evenings Dena would come and would console her, “Don’t worry *bhabi*, we are helpless in front of Almighty Allah. Abu was my brother. Whatever I can do, I will do by God’s will.”

At first, Nesti couldn’t comprehend. But when *Iddah*<sup>5</sup> was over, Dena straightforwardly told her that she should marry him. Hearing this, Nesti thought of pushing him out of the house but she only said, “Brother I didn’t want to remarry.”

From that day, the attitude of Dena changed. Earlier, in the evenings, he would pay her regularly. Now, sometimes he gave her four sometimes three rupees. He would feign that business is slow. He started staying away for days at a stretch. He would either pretend illness or would find fault with some part of the coach. But now enough was enough and Nesti told him, “You don’t exert now. Hand over the coach and horse to me.”

After much hemming and hawing, Dino was forced at last to place the horse and coach back in Nesti’s custody. She, in turn, gave it to Maja, a friend of Abu’s. Within a few days, he proposed marriage as well. When she turned him down, his eyes changed; the warmth in them seemed to vanish. Nesti took the horse and coach back from him and gave it to a coachman she didn’t know. He crossed all boundaries, arriving completely drunk one night to give her the money and making a grab for her as soon as he walked through the door. She let him have it and fired him at once.

For eight or ten days, the coach was in the stable, out of work, racking up costs- feed on one hand, stable rent on the other. Nesti was in a state of confusion. People were either trying to marry her or rape her or rob her. When she went outside, she was met with ugly stares. One night a neighbor jumped the wall and started making advances towards her. Nesti went half mad wondering what she should do.

Back at home, she thought ‘What if I were to drive the coach myself? When she used to go on rides with Abu, she would often drive it. She was acquainted with the routes as well. But then she thought of what people would say. Her mind came up with many rejoinders, “What is the harm? Do women not toil and do manual labor? Here working in mines, there in offices, thousands working at home, you have to fill your stomach one way or another!”

She spent a few days thinking about it. At last, she decided to do it. She was confident she could. And so, after asking for God’s help, she arrived one morning at the stable. When she began harnessing the horse to the carriage, the other coachmen were stupefied; some thought it was a joke and roared with laughter. The older coachmen tried dissuading her, saying it was

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<sup>5</sup> A specified period of time that must elapse before a Muslim widow or divorcee may legitimately remarry.

unseemly. But Nesti wouldn't listen. She fitted up the carriage, polished its brass tackle, and after showing the horse great affection and speaking tender words to Abu, she set out from the stable. The coachmen were stunned by Nesti's dexterity; she handled the carriage expertly.

As the word spread through the town, a commotion erupted that a beautiful woman was riding a coach. She became the talk of the town. When people heard, they would eagerly wait for the time when she would pass on the road.

At first, Nesti would shy away from male passengers but soon her shyness vanished and she started earning a handsome income. Her coach never remained idle, not even for a minute. Here the passengers would step down, there they got on. Sometimes the passengers would even fight among themselves over who was to board first.

When the work increased, Nest set hours for which the coach would go out: seven to noon and two to six in the afternoon. This timing proved to be very comfortable. Chinni was also happy. But Nesti would feel that often, people would get on her coach only to be near her. They would make her roam. They would also crack dirty jokes among themselves. They would talk to make her hear. Sometimes she would feel that she was not selling herself but people were buying her slyly anyway; she was also aware of the fact that the city's other coachmen thought ill of her. Even though having these feelings, she wasn't agitated because of her self-confidence. She was peaceful.

One morning, the municipal committee men called her and revoked her license. The reason was that women couldn't drive coaches. Nesti asked, "Sir, Why can't women drive coaches?"

The reply came, "They just can't. Your license is revoked."

Nesti said, "Sir, take my coach and horse also but tell me why a woman can't drive coach. Women can work on spinning wheels to feed their bellies. They can carry rubble in baskets to earn their livelihood. Women can work in mines, sifting through pieces of coal to earn their bread.

Why can't I drive a coach? I know nothing else. This coach and horse belonged to my husband. Why can't I drive it? How would I earn my livelihood? Sir, pity on me. Why do you stop me from hard work? What should I do, tell me?"

The officer replied, "Go to the *bazaar*<sup>6</sup> and find some spot. You are sure to earn more that way."

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<sup>6</sup> Market/a brothel

Hearing this, the real Nesti in her was reduced to ashes. “Yes Sir,” she answered softly and left. She sold her coach and horse for whatever she could get and went straight to Abu’s grave. For a moment she stood near it silently. Her eyes were completely dry as if after drizzling, bright sunshine had made the earth absorb all the moisture. Her lips parted and she addressed the grave, “Abu, Nesti died today in the committee office.”

With this, she went away. The next day she submitted her application. She was given a license to sell her body.

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### **About the Author**

Saadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955) was a prolific writer and playwright who unveiled the naked truths of 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 the 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 glimpses of which can be seen in *Mozail*, *Naya Qanoon*, *Toba Tek Singh*, etc. He died on 18<sup>th</sup> January 1955 in Lahore, Punjab, West Pakistan.

### **About Translator**

Nayeem Ahmad Shah, an esteemed scholar, attained his Master’s degree in English Literature from the prestigious University of Kashmir in 2011. His academic prowess is further evidenced by his success in qualifying for both the UGC NET (Twice) and SET examinations in English Literature. A prolific contributor to various distinguished English journals, Shah’s literary accomplishments extend to numerous newspaper articles, insightful book reviews, and evocative poems. His scholarly interests are deeply rooted in Translation Studies and Postcolonial Literature. Among his notable translations are “Mozail” and “Black Trousers,” works that reflect his nuanced understanding and dedication to the craft. Currently, he imparts his knowledge as an Assistant Professor of English at Abdul Ahad Azad Memorial Degree College/Cluster University, Bemina, Srinagar. For correspondence, he can be reached at nayeem.eng.ku@gmail.com.