



Chocolate

AND OTHER WRITINGS

ON MALE HOMOEROTICISM

Pandey Bechan Sharma “Ugra”

Translated and with an introduction

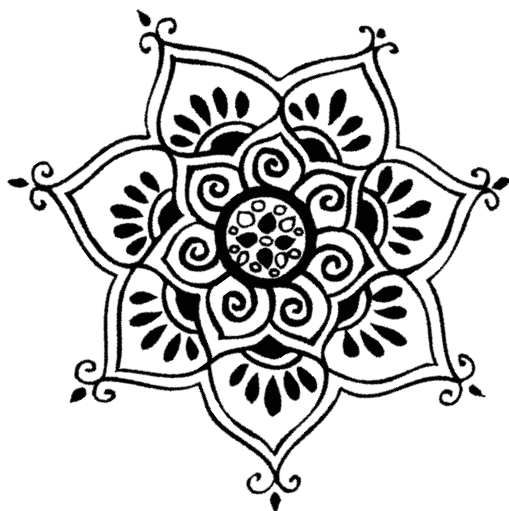
by Ruth Vanita



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*This translation is dedicated
to Prabha Dixit and Archana Varma*



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NOTE ON THIS TRANSLATION

All translations from Hindi and Urdu are by me unless otherwise indicated.

As with any translation, there were numerous difficulties in conveying nuances. Problems arose especially with regard to Sanskritic, Perso-Urdu, and regional language terms for sexual preferences, such as *batukprem*, *laundebaazi*, *paatalpanthi*, and with idiomatic turns of phrase, particularly those that involve puns and wordplay, such as Ugra's use of his own pen name and that of the journal *Matvala* as adjectives within the text. In general, I resolve these problems by translating the term or phrase and then providing further explanation in a footnote that appears on the same page as the text.

I translate idioms literally when I judge that such translation adequately conveys meaning, for example, the sense of *murdey par talwar chalana* does come across in the literal translation, "fighting a corpse with a sword." In other cases, I provide an approximation in English, such as *sanaki* as "crazy" or "eccentric," and subsequently explain in a footnote.

Where the resonance of a Hindi term is already widely prevalent in an Indian English term I use the Indian English term, such as "bad character" or "characterless" (*dushcharitra*, *charitrahin*) for a person perceived as sexually immoral. The stories are liberally sprinkled with quotes from Urdu, Brajbhasha, Awadhi, and Sanskrit, many of which are in verse, and two novel titles are themselves quotes from verse. Where literal translation does not convey the metaphorical meaning of

the original phrase, I provide an English saying that conveys the meaning, and provide further explanation in a footnote or elsewhere. Thus I translate *Phagun ke Din Char* as “Life is Brief, Enjoy It” and discuss the connotations in the introduction. I try to retain some of the poetic quality in translation, but where I find the specific wordplay impossible to translate, as in Bihari’s “*Harini ke nainan te hari! neekey yeh nain,*” I explain it in a footnote. Nevertheless, many words are heavy with a suggestiveness, which in Sanskrit-Hindi poetics is termed *dhwani*, that cannot be communicated in translation. For example, a *harini* is a doe, but the word “doe,” while it has many poetic associations of its own in English, does not have the lyrical and mystical associations with love that *harini* (or *hirani*) has acquired through centuries of use in Indian poetry and painting.

Except for the word “chocolate,” all English words that appear in English script, or transliterated in Devanagari in the original, are italicized in my translation. My own insertions appear in square brackets. All Hindi, Urdu and Sanskrit words that I retain in the original language are also italicized.

The author’s use of single and double quotation marks have been adapted to American standards. All ellipses and parentheses are reproduced from the original. I have retained Ugra’s stylistic idiosyncrasies, such as his habit of using two or more exclamation points to indicate extreme emotion or of liberally sprinkling third-person prose narrative with the type of dialogue that would normally appear in a drama or film script (both genres he worked in), where the speaker’s name is separated from first-person speech with a colon. He also divides stories into sections with no apparent logic—often, in the same story, some sections are marked by numbers and others by asterisks or ellipses. I have retained these stylistic quirks in an effort to be faithful to the original, but also to convey the perhaps uneven terrain of Hindi style in his time.

In all my previous writings on gender and sexuality in India I have followed the practice of spelling Indian language words as close to the way they are commonly pronounced as possible and therefore have not used diacritical marks or transliteration systems. This is because my work is intended for general readers as well as scholars. Many other scholars also now follow this practice.

The fiction appears here in chronological order. The first five stories are in the order in which they appeared in *Matvala* in 1924 (see the prefatory materials), followed by the three that Ugra added in the 1927 book, *Chocolate*, concluding with an extract from his 1927 novel, *Chand Haseenon ke Khutoot* (Letters from Some Beautiful Ones). In *Chocolate*, Ugra arranged the stories in this order: “O Beautiful Young Man,” “Dissolute Love,” “In Prison,” “Chocolate,” “Kept Boy,” “We are in Love with Lucknow,” “Waist Curved like a She-Cobra,” and “Discussing Chocolate.” But most readers had read the stories in the order in which they appeared in *Matvala*, in 1924: “Chocolate,” “Kept Boy,” “We Are in Love with Lucknow,” “Waist Curved Like a She-Cobra,” and “Discussing Chocolate.” These five stories are the ones that began the controversy, and they also contain the more ambiguous or even positive representations of homoeroticism. The three new stories that Ugra chose to add to the 1927 book are much more heavy-handed in their negativity. It is no accident that these are also the three stories that do not cite any poetry in homoerotic contexts. My adherence to the original order in which the stories first appeared in print is intended to provide today’s reader with a clearer sense of the excitement and horror that first readers would have felt after encountering Ugra’s representations of homoeroticism.



Portrait of Pandey Bechan Sharma “Ugra” by Prashant Kumar Nayak from *About Me* by
Pandey Bechan Sharma Ugra, translated with an introduction by Ruth Vanita
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INTRODUCTION

The first public debate on homosexuality in modern India took place in the 1920s; it was ignited by a collection of Hindi short stories entitled *Chocolate* (1927) by Hindi nationalist writer Pandey Bechan Sharma (1900–1967), better known as “Ugra,” which means “extreme,” and can, depending on context, also mean “fierce,” “terrible,” or “intense.”¹

POLITICAL CONTEXT

Ugra’s pen name reflects political conditions in India at the time he began writing. He was in his twenties during the 1920s, when north India was in the throes of the struggle for independence from British rule. Like almost all writers of the time, Ugra was involved both with this struggle and with the social-reform dimension of nationalism. Social-reform movements advocating women’s education and rights, widow remarriage, and Hindu-Muslim amity, while opposing such practices as dowry, untouchability, and child marriage had preceded nationalism in the nineteenth century. These issues continued to both animate and divide nationalists, since the desire for social reform was accompanied by the desire to preserve Indian traditions, and nationalists differed on how this dual task could best be accomplished.

While most Hindi writers were followers of Gandhi, several were right-wing Hindu or Muslim nationalists or left-wing communists, and Gandhians, too, were influenced by these different tendencies. Many were critical, for different reasons, of what they saw as Gandhi’s mod-