



SHORT STORY

The Poison of Poisons

—Syed Mujtaba Ali

AGHA Ahmed was disgusted with life. His wife, Malika Khanum, was just a little woman—a whiff of wind could blow her away—but who could tell that from the way she talked and prattled and blew hot and cold from the first breaking of dawn, without ever stopping even to catch her breath. Agha Ahmed could never escape her verbal slings and arrows—they were all directed at him. He had to suffer her insults in silence. At least fifty times a day, he was called by unspeakable names that caused him a world of heartburns. Malika never failed to pinch him on his supposed failure to provide her with—well, anything: expensive jewellery and ornaments, for example. This was his daily fare, like his daily bread and cheese. Talking of bread and cheese, Agha could've ignored her insults if she put some real stuff on the table, the way Agha expected. The bread, as it turned out, was invariably burnt, the cheese came with greenish mildews that his wife never even bothered to scrape off. Agha Ahmed was a day labourer—he always had a huge appetite.

Things were slowly but imperceptibly reaching towards a show-down, which eventually came one day about twenty years after their marriage. Agha Ahmed was searching for something in the store when he suddenly discovered a rich supply of crisp bread, moist kebab, hard boiled eggs, and greasy pickles, hoarded away at a secret hiding place.

Agha Ahmed did not eat his supper that night. His wife was all over him, as usual. "Agha, his excellency seems to be in a bit of a huff tonight," she jeered, "and has lost his appetite. This bread and this cheese would not do for him. But tell me, where do I get you eggs and kebabs, and a bit of a pickle, perhaps?" "So she talks about eggs and kebabs that she herself has been feasting on!"

Agha decided to kill his wife. It would not do him any good if he divorced her—he had tried that at least a hundred times. Every time Malika pretended that she did not hear a thing, and left him to himself. They lived in a little cottage at the edge of the forest with hardly a neighbour nearby. So no one would come and tell them to part ways as it should be done after a divorce, and not to share the same bed as it was immoral. Not that it would've helped Agha much if there were neighbours around. They wouldn't dare to set foot on his property. Agha suddenly remembered that they had no visitor in the last 15 years.

That night, Agha lay in his bed, awake, his head busy planning the neatest execution of his design.

In the morning, Agha went to the forest, and dug out a deep trench. He then put some bamboo slats crosswise

over the pit and camouflaged it with thick leaves and branches.

Towards the evening, Agha confronted his wife. "I feel a bit under the weather," he said. "How about a little walk in the forest?"

Malika's response was one of utter incredulity. She burst out into a hearty laughter. After about ten minutes, she boomed out in her usual voice, "Going out for a walk, are we? So now you have a fit of romanticism! Why don't you forget the whole thing?"

Agha was insistent. It had taken him a lot of hard labour and time to dig that trench.

Malika finally relented. They went into the forest. Now Agha did his trick. He steered her clear to the pit and then, bang! One push and Malika was in the pit. Agha then covered the pit well with tree branches and loads of leaves, and returned home. Of course, he did not forget to heartily thank his patron saints. Agha had to cook his own dinner that night. So he went into the kitchen. Wherever he put his hands, he discovered troves of tasty food and delicacies. Malika had stashed them away for her own private consumption. There were halwa, preserved fruits, varieties of condiments and pickles, even dried deer meat. He cooked happily and ate a hearty meal. Without his wife's siren voice booming in the house, he knew he would have a good night's sleep. He was thrilled by the prospect of a night of tranquility.

NEXT morning however, Agha felt a cloud pass the blue sky of his mind. Malika was his wife, after all, whatever she had done to him. Didn't he vow, at the time of their marriage, to protect her at all times, till the end of his life, and that too in the name of the prophet? On the other hand, he felt little inclination to bring that shrew back home.

Agha did what five others would have done in his place. "What the heck," he said, "let me go and see how she is. Then I'll think about what to do."

As Agha removed the leaves from the pit entrance, he heard a heart rending cry coming out from the depths. "Save me, for God's sake, save me." But who was it that made the noise? It was certainly not Malika Khanam's voice. Agha removed some more leaves and looked hard. "Damn me, it's a snake! It's a cobra! And look how huge it is."

The cobra's pleas were insistent. "Save me, please do something," it kept repeating. "I'll give you money, lots of it. A thousand, a hundred thousand. I'll tell you where hidden treasures of the world are. I'll make you a king."

It took some time for Agha to get his wits back. "By God," he said to the cobra, "I don't understand what your problem is. You kill people with a mere

touch. What makes you fearful of your own life now?"

The cobra replied with obvious disgust. "Some life! Who told you to save my life? Save me from this devil here, from this woman." The cobra's voice cracked in pain. "The whole night this windbag has driven me crazy. She never stopped talking for a minute. She accused me of cowardice, of not being able to save her although I am a male snake. And she thinks she is a fragile flower of a woman, in need of all the protection the world can offer, and I failed to even show her a way out of this hole. I am a good for nothing dirty little snake, if you believe her, a dropping of cow dung..."

"Why didn't you put a stop to all that?" Agha inquired. "You know, one bite and she would be gone."

The snake stopped shouting. Its voice fell to a whisper. "You tell me to bite her? That woman? The poison she has in her damned voice is enough to fill up a million snakes like me. If I bit her, I'd be the one to die. And no quack that cures snake bites would be good enough to save me. Let's discuss that some other time, but first get me out of here, please. I'll pay you back with all the wealth in the world. I promise. I swear by the name of Solomon the king of beasts, birds and reptiles."

As Agha's story is not a fairy tale, Malika was seen, after the night's incident, to have changed a great deal. A night in the same pit as the cobra had mellowed her. She grew calmer. During Agha's conversation with the cobra, Malika did not say a word. This was a record no doubt, for, even on their first night of honeymoon, Malika had kept her tongue to herself only for a couple of minutes.

After the cobra had given him the assurance of hidden treasures if Agha rescued him, Malika was heard commenting in a low voice, "They do know about these things."

Agha Ahmed was greedy for money. He made the snake swear three times on King Solomon, and pulled it out of the hole. He had to pull his wife out, too. She swore she would not be the same Malika again; that, in fact, she had already changed.

The cobra told Agha about the treasures, but they were a long way off, in the north pole. It had an alternate plan, though, that would ensure him a lot of money without any trouble. "The town's police chief has a daughter," the



snake said, "and I'll wrap myself around her neck one of these days. I wouldn't allow anyone to come near her. I'd threaten to bite her if anyone so much as made a move. But when you appear in the scene, I'd just turn my tail and leave the girl alone. I'm sure you can get a lot of money for 'saving' the girl. But I warn you, I'll allow you this only for once. Don't stretch your luck, and don't be greedy."

What! the devil says the Paternoster.

A good turn from a snake monster?

The cobra's attack on the police chief's daughter created such a big noise in the city that its ripples reached poor Agha's ears in a couple of days. The girl was unconscious for three days; the cobra maintained a stranglehold around her neck and threatened to bite her

head off. The chief had declared a hundred thousand taka reward for anyone who could rescue the girl. The snake charmers however were not ever prepared to go near the cobra, let alone rescue the girl. It was Medusa's very father, they declared.

When Agha Ahmed arrived at the chief's house, no one paid him any attention. What was he, when the place was full of big names? What could he do when master-charmers had failed. And in that appearance, in that dress?

The police chief however, had heard of Agha's arrival. The medicine man from the jungle, the expert.

His stomach full of the secret art.

Agha's appearance did not inspire any confidence in the chief. But his daughter's life was at stake.

He was prepared for any last ditch attempt, however desperate it was. It was better than the ditch the grave diggers were preparing for her, any way.

Things happened as the cobra had planned. As the 'medicine man' Agha entered the girl's chamber, the cobra released her from its grip, and slithered away, as fast its slimy belly could carry it forward. The chief's daughter had soon regained her consciousness, smile now played on her lips. The dour looking police chief's face had turned soft with feelings of goodwill for Agha. He gave him the reward money, and on top of it, made him the forest officer of the stretch of forest land near his house. Agha was rich at last, and he was in a position to eat deer meat for both his daily meals.

Agha was happy. Malika was happy too; she had all the jewellery and ornaments she wanted. Her tongue had wilted, too. Besides, she now had an army of servants and maids to command, and they were enough to keep her vocal cord in shape. The poor husband could at last be spared. Agha's drawing room was now full of friends, and he spent his time chatting with them.

But stay. Barely a month had passed when the news spread that a cobra had got the prime minister's daughter. Which cobra was it? Which else, but the one that had made the deal with Agha.

This time the reward was a million taka. The sentries, the foot soldiers and the retinue of the prime minister rushed towards Agha Ahmed's house.

If the medicine man is near. Why waste your time elsewhere?

Agha Ahmed however remembered very clearly what the cobra had told him. Not to be greedy, yes. The snake would put up a show only for once. Agha therefore refused. But his refusal fell on deaf ears. His friends were all excited. "What luck! You must've done something good to deserve it. You have your parents' blessings. Agha, otherwise, these things don't happen everyday." Agha was forced into a palanquin. He had no choice but to go.

The cobra looked hard at Agha. "Your greed seems to have taken over. Didn't I tell you not to try more than once? Don't you remember or have you found it convenient to forget? Anyway, since you did me a good turn—saved my life as a

matter of fact, I'll let you have it your way this time. But this is absolutely the last time. If I see you ever again, I'll kill you. Now that's a promise."

Agha Ahmed had no peace of mind even with a reward of a million taka and five hundred horses. His heart had dried up like the Sahara. His tummy turned, his perched mouth refused water. He was panicked about what the cobra would do next. He knew very well that there would not be any next time. He decided to flee the country.

BUT the police chief happened to drop in that very day. A round of greetings, handshakes and embraces followed. "Oh brother Nawab," the chief said in a wet voice. "What luck you have. It is your lot now to rescue—who else, but the princess, the apple of the country's eye, the sunshine of our motherland. Hurry up, brother. For, as we talk, that bastard cobra is squeezing the precious life out of our princess."

Nawab (he was indeed a Nawab now) Agha fell on his knees. He started crying. He knew he couldn't do a thing to save the princess, and the police chief must be told the truth.

Now, a police chief's heart is not made out of butter. He knew what he had to do. So he ordered a subordinate to cage the bird. "Lock him up in one of the palanquins."

Nawab Agha Ahmed was pushed, rather unceremoniously, into a palanquin. People on either side of the road however, shouted in his name. When he entered the city, from one casement the police chief's daughter and from another the prime minister's daughter showered flowers on him.

Agha Ahmed, his eyes closed, repeated to himself all the names of saints that he knew, and all the prayers that he had learnt. The king himself had come to receive him. He led Agha down to his daughter's chamber.

Agha closed the door of the princess' room from behind.

The cobra shouted at him. "You are back again, you hopeless greedy bum. I'll fix you this time. You are dead. I'll start with your eyes, you just wait."

Agha however, was all politeness and courtesy. "I am not here for money this time, oh cobra," he said, "you've given me enough. You have done me many good turns, so I decided to return just one favour. I was passing by when I heard that you are in the neighbourhood. But you see, my wife, Malika Khanum had told me in the morning that she would come to pay respect to the princess in the evening. She'd be here any minute now. You know her, don't you—heh,

heh. So I thought, well, why not give you an advance notice and save you from—"

Agha's words were drowned by the screams of horror that the cobra let out. Then like a flash of lightning it vanished. Even Agha couldn't see which way it went.

Agha Ahmed led a peaceful life ever after.

This story is known to many people in many lands. I heard it from an Iranian merchant one night in a serai, lying on a canvas bed. After he had told me the story, the merchant asked, "Can you tell me what is the moral of the story?"

"It's easy," I told him. "It is an example of how much a battle axe a woman can be. It's nothing new though. Lots of wise people have told us as much."

The merchant remained silent for a while. "It could be," he said. "But you know, Iranian stories often have two sets of morals, like the elephant has two sets of teeth—one for show, and the other for chewing the food. You've identified the moral-for-show alright. But the other moral is really deep. And this is what it is: if a hypocritical liar tries to do you good either on his own, or when he is forced, don't accept it. For he will as soon start destroying you, so that you don't enjoy the benefit."

If however, you have poison of the order of Malika Khanum in your house, that's something else.

"But the question is: how many of us have a wife like her?"

The above story of Dr. Syed Mujtaba Ali (of Deshey Bideshey fame) has been translated by his grand-nephew Dr. Syed Manjurul Islam, a noted critic, and currently the Chairman of the Department of English, University of Dhaka.



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