

fiction

Jodu Jalaluddin

By Shaukat Osman

THE place of the incident was Karachi city.

Every port has about it certain international characteristics. Both the brilliance and the murkiness of the world gather in these places, though the proportions of the mixture depend on the country in question.

The town and port of Karachi, after becoming the capital of an Islamic state, was soon inflated in wealth and commerce and a hundred other respects. Among these was the great increase in the number of night clubs, cabarets, motels. Feting guests is a major part of international business. Our local ways may not regale our foreign guests; so foreign tastes are imported to make them feel at home. In business these are not trifling matters.

Many permanent and temporary inhabitants of Karachi looked forward to the Saturdays. Not just because the following day was a Sunday, but because the liberties of a Saturday were many. Take the bar hours, for example. On weekdays hotel bars closed at eleven, but on Saturdays they remained open until two o'clock in the morning by law. The doors remained open practically all night. For pleasure lovers, time limits were like making love by the hour. The more carefree the mind the deeper the pleasure. The same rule applied to place as to time. How long could you drink at just one bar. There was no fun if one could not go from one public house to another and tasting different environments and drinks. There wasn't much time for this except on Saturdays.

That Saturday Mr Advani, the veteran manager of Hotel Mumtaj, had been busy since afternoon. He was busy making preparations so that later he did not have to hear complaints from pleasure lovers. He wanted to make sure that some extra room, more than its usual capacity, could be made in the hotel lawn. He had no doubt that there would be thumping business: he was looking forward to a record sale. The question of increment would arise next month — such thoughts might have been at work behind Advani's perseverance.

The lawn, about fifty by fifty feet, was at the back of the hotel. Some acacia trees with their spreading branches stood at the corners. There was a mosaic terrace in the middle of the lawn for dancers and a small stage at the northern end with seats for the orchestra at its back. Steps came down from the stage onto the narrow path that led to the mosaic terrace. The closer the singer or dancer got to the customer, the greater the business. Tables surrounded by a quartet of chairs were laid on the lawn. Waiters brought the drinks to order. A narrow alley emerged from the bar on to the lawn. The stage was another twenty feet away. The performers had to cross this path promptly, skipping over the hurdles of many staring eyes.

The manager had in front of him a full glass of whisky and soda. He was sipping at it, ordering his men around. 'Get fifty more chairs out of the store room.'

The boy was hesitant. So great was the number of chairs already brought out on the lawn that fifty more would mean that the seats would have to be laid very close to one another, and this would drive off the customers. The real business was selling whisky. If customers — one could say, drinkers — did not stay long, where would the business come from?

Before another sip, Advani made a face to express annoyance, 'Oh do what I tell you.'

A new singer-cum-dancer called Jamila Kashmiri had appeared at Hotel Mumtaj. She had already raised waves in Karachi. Hotels competed with one another to book her ahead of others. She was new in town; whether she danced well or not, she was fresh goods. Many leisure lovers would come out of curiosity. Advani was a veteran. He had beaten other managers at the game, but that was another story.

Such living proof of his efficiency that he had grabbed her before others kept him even more agile. Wasn't he smart? From his clothes, it would seem he had just emerged from a tailor's and escaped from under an iron. Though forty-five, Advani was a youthful, successful man and a skilled manipulator.

Usually the hotel cabaret hardly had any customers at all before half past ten. Many hoped to spend the whole night here. Very respectable people did not like spending their nights at home. They came even later after midnight.

That night the lawn was filled to capacity a few minutes before ten. Small coloured bulbs were tied to the branches of the acacias. Arrangements were made to create a bright day on the lawn which now looked mysterious in dim light.

Long fluorescent tubes were fitted to the walls of the hotel. Lighting was arranged to create magic. Usually, customers preferred dim light, which had its advantages. Many were not used to drinking in front of their elders. Freed from shame, they could make loud, indiscrete remarks, remaining unrecognised. Soft light was good for self-absorption. It's hard to tell what actually brought people here, though they obviously came in search of pleasure unobtainable elsewhere. Some say liquid drink is poison, but poison is often needed to counter other poisons.

Business was in full swing. The lawn was lively. Whispered voices, loud laughter following soft voices and occasional bursts of music from the orchestra created an enhanced atmosphere. Even the manager went about tending to the customers' needs. Business threw where politeness was mixed with shrewdness.

Many customers were happy to have just a chair. The guests were respectable people, well-dressed well-groomed all, some sons-in-law of aristocratic tailors, others might have emerged from the distilling factory of the Ajanta Chemicals. A whole lot of gentlefolk in their best dress popping about like popcorn. And still there were whispers to the ear of the manager: A seat, Monsieur?

But why such desperation? It was well-known that a new dancer would not go anywhere until she had gone stale in this town. Contracts would pass from hotel to hotel, cabaret to cabaret, until someone else became the object of this craze, making the current flow in her direction, letting Karachi abandon its onetime conqueror. So why such impatience for a glimpse of Jamila Kashmiri at the Hotel Mumtaj? Another opportunity would surely be available tomorrow. But that wouldn't do. Because a great competition existed among the pleasure-seeking mob. Who had seen her first? Who would win the laurel of the avant garde from his interlocutors, rouse their envy? Oh, what I've seen!

Advani knew the temporary and permanent residents of Karachi very well. And business? Perhaps there would be a record sale.

It was a summer day and some, fully suited, were sweating or exuding whisky through the pores of their skin — a matter of judgment. But everybody was firmly seated and nobody looked impatient. At about a quarter to eleven the manager himself announced: 'Ladies and gentlemen, now you meet our new enchantress, Jamila Kashmiri!'

Jamila Kashmiri! A storm imploded on the lawn, though nobody, for the sake of decorum, cried out or put their fingers into their mouths for a wolf-whistle. They simply poured oil on their internal fires, wiping out pegs of whisky.

The moment Advani announced Jamila Kashmiri, the whole lawn turned into the interior of a grave. It was doubtful if anyone was breathing.

The orchestra became louder when Jamila quickly rushed on the stage like a sprightly mouse and the light flooded the lawn.

The dancer's body was clad in a light sleeveless silk kamiz and flouncing ghagra trousers. She was certainly made by God's own hands. The proportions of her legs, torso and head were an example of classical sculpture; in her bodyline there was the rhythm of a lyric.

That body had an entry for the eyes, but no exit.

Jamila Kashmiri took the microphone in her hand without hurry. Time seemed self-imprisoned under her feet. Look at her eyes — they were not doe-eyes, they were middle size, but their look was that of a hunter whose eyes were steadfastly fixed on the target before the arrow was shot, her face not only anticipating the pleasure of the kill but also lit by the rays of self-confidence. The kill was certain — such amid did not go astray.

The orchestra came to her support, slightly raising its pitch.

Jamila's voice sounded divine, on this lawn, in Karachi for the first time, 'Now listen to the palpitation of my heart — no, no, look at the palpitation of my heart!'

Jodu Bhattacharya sat up, startled. 'The palpitation of my heart....'

Not all the sounds entered Jodu Bhattacharya's ear, but the singer's face floated distinctly in his consciousness. Here a flashback is in order.

The palpitation of my heart....'

Jodu Bhattacharya came to Karachi as the chief executive of a big firm. He had a reputation in the business community. He was six feet three, fair, muscular — in short, there were very few

males like Jodu Bhattacharya in Pakistan. His qualities which turned the soil dug up by a rat into gold-dust adorned Bhattacharya. He needed neither uncles nor oil to get to the top of the company. He spoke fluent English as well as Urdu and he had a smattering of Pashto and Punjabi. The man was as dear to the company as to its workers. He was as good at grabbing indenting business after carousing all night with foreign consultants and their associates at the club as he was of getting workers to accept without a word his adjudication in labour troubles. Not for nothing had Jodu Bhattacharya risen so high in

wards the mosaic terrace. Her aim was to get close to the audience, singing as before. She had a microphone in her hand, the cable covered in black leather trailing on the floor like the tail of a snake, which, above, had taken the body of a woman.

Jodu Bhattacharya felt breathless. He had never seen such beauty. The snake's eyes were not seeking a road through the eyes of anyone in the audience. God save one from such a mishap. For who could resist the fire of those eyes? One would have to live the rest of one's life blinded. But Jodu did not lower his eyes.



a company dominated by Muslims. And his honesty was a legend in the business world. A commitment made by Bhattacharya was absolutely guaranteed. In big business nothing moved without the merciful approval of the bureaucrats (who were themselves under the thumbs of their political masters). Jodu Bhattacharya did not just throw in the line and sit around in the hope of a catch, he hooked and landed big fish with ease. He looked to their fancies. Some loved drink, some women, some had a yen for gold. Bhattacharya's eyes were omnipresent, like God's. Wouldn't a company give its key to the 'lynx' to such a man? It did not cost it much. A monthly salary of two thousand, club bills, a house and a car — another four or five thousand at the most. Last year the company profit exceeded six million.

Jodu Bhattacharya, a resident of another hotel, had that evening walked out on to the streets of Karachi after dinner. Not out of necessity, but simply to wipe off the day's boredom (so many smelly faces had to be licked, this office and that....tch!), he walked out, though two chevrolets waited for him at the hotel door, twenty-four hours. Jodu Bhattacharya was a very sociable man, but that day he was possessed by a desire to be alone. He would be unable to say when he had walked through the hall of the Hotel Mumtaj to the lawn at the back. He had not counted his whiskies; he had felt the need to pour them down the hatch, and he did that. It would be natural if he was a little high, but he had never lost control of himself. After a night of tempestuous drinking, he himself drove his friends to their houses. Whatever the quality he drank, nobody could ever say that Jodu Bhattacharya was drunk once his hands were on the steering wheel. He was taken aback when a melody suddenly hit his ear: 'The palpitation of my heart....'

What had he been doing until his eyes fell on the mistress of the voice. Born a Bhattacharya, Jodu had taken lessons in Sanskrit from his grandfather. Unknown to him, the language of Old Bengal emerged from his lips in vague sounds: 'Is this a dream, a trance or lucidity?'

Jodu Bhattacharya loosened his tie a little and called, 'Boy, a large whisky.' His eyes were on the singer, the movement of her body was so gentle and in tune with the rhythm of the song, that it seemed a sculpted figure was slowly coming to life. At this moment of revivification the movement deep inside the body found its expression in the sound of her song and the rhythm of the other parts of her body:

The palpitation of my heart....'

Jodu Bhattacharya's eyes were unblinking. The enchantress now put a foot forward, moving in gentle steps to

As soon as the snake came right in the middle of the audience, whatever agitation there was simmered down. Was it the fear of being bitten? No, when music and beauty mingled, even a scoundrel was softened, his skin exuding the fragrance of chameli. All the popcorn mouths went dumb in an instant.

Jodu was not a resident of the hotel. His seat was in a corner, quite far from the mosaic terrace. Pity! He could have stayed in this hotel. But that was not to be. Other, more distinguished, hotels were bound to draw him for his business reputation. But then there was a consolation. If he were a resident, and been so close, who knows what he would have done. Those red lips and the sword-like body was enough to madden even the most self-possessed of men. He could then be publicly humiliated.

The snake was now returning. From the depths of the Brahmin mind of a Bhattacharya a question surfaced for a moment: 'How would Kalidasa describe her?'

The snake was going back. Humanity, residing in one's face, demanded decorum. When the back was turned, such social norms no longer held.

Jodu Bhattacharya was on his own. He was staring unblinkingly. Was he out of his mind? What had happened to him?

From a nearby table, a man said in a drunken voice, 'I've been murdered.'

'Inside or outside?' quipped a fellow cup-bearer, causing mirth.

Jodu Bhattacharya was annoyed. He would have liked to crack their skulls, knocking them together. They sounded as if some gorillas had broken into a sultan's harem. Barbarians! Drinking in the elixir of beauty in the company of such animals was unacceptable.

The palpitation of my heart....'

Everybody's heart-throb returned to the stage, microphone in hand. The song rose gradually to a crescendo. There stood, bowing, Jamila Kashmiri, holding the microphone. The applause nearly cracked the lawn like a rice field in drought. The snake disappeared along the narrow alley.

Now the microphone was in the manager's hand. He announced that Jamila Kashmiri would appear again at 12.30 to give a taste of her dance.

Only Jodu Bhattacharya did not clap. He was enwrapped in the image of the dancer, her voice and her body.

Brought back to his senses by the applause, Jodu looked at his watch. It was just half past eleven. He would have to keep company with these barbarians for another hour. If he left his seat, it would be hard to recover it. So he sat there, helpless, occasionally attacking his glass.

Two minutes to half past twelve, Advani

announced: 'Ladies and gentlemen, now the last item. The dance of the bather, by Jamila Kashmiri.'

The lawn went quiet at the announcement, as if the guests had just heard their death sentence read out to them.

Jodu Bhattacharya stood on the stage in a nylon sari, a triangle of nylon knickers underneath. Her breasts were covered by a light blue bra; that too was of nylon. Such clothes were like barbed wire fence round a government store or an open warehouse, things were safe, though the vision was without obstruction.

The orchestra began with a tender tune and Jamila started on her dance routine after a bow to the audience.

Looking carefully about to make sure there wasn't anybody around the bushy bank of the *jheel*, she took off her imaginary clothes before jumping in. Then she started playing with water, racing with little waves, nudging into warm water to talk to herself. Then she surfaced for a breath, to address the sky. The song gusted away simultaneously. Here Menaka and Kinnari were present in the same person.

The sense of time and place had long since taken leave of Jodu Bhattacharya, who was looking at something indescribable. He was not looking at water play, but at a divine princess at play.

Now the bather, raising waves, advanced towards the audience, her destination the mosaic terrace. She brushed by the tables the fortunate ones had booked earlier. Jodu remained firm in his decision. No, he wouldn't go that close. One could do something desperate in such close proximity. A moment's slip could lead to lifelong ignominy. Yet it was hard to weigh these things in terms of profit and loss. The woman was a seaborne Aphrodite. Jodu appreciated the truth of what he had once heard. He would give himself up to this goddess in total submission if only for a moment. One should worship at her pedestal. Being born human would otherwise be meaningless.

The bather, now enthroned on the mosaic terrace, was addressing her subjects: 'Come, jump in. Or there will be no end of regret. I'm the pool now'. Throwing out her arms she sang while still bathing. Then she started swimming, lying on the surface of the pool, her breasts afloat. The legs were invisible; they now became visible and rose from the surface of the water towards the sky. Those who were at the table close by did not have to get to their feet to satisfy their curiosity. Only the distant punters stood up. Jodu remained seated as if he had no curiosity, as if he had seen everything.

The bather now lay on her back on the water, her legs splayed out in either direction.

A man, seated at a table near Jodu, was up on his feet, watching the fun. He suddenly cried, 'Look at the delta.' Some laughed, some trained their eyes between the upraised legs, some looked to see where the other sultans were looking. Observing the movement of other customers was a part of the fun.

One in the audience was drunk, nearly senseless. He loudly advised: 'Brothers, watch your homeland well.'

Laughter rose from many tables. If Jodu had a gun, he would have shot the lot. But he did not leave his chair. The bather had drowned; she would of course surface again.

Within five minutes the bather slowly walked back to the stage, looking to her clothes. Not only did the whole lawn applaud, people got to their feet in ovation.

Jodu was sitting, he remained firmly seated.

When the lawn was empty, Jodu rose from his chair, his lips pronouncing faintly, 'Jamila.'

One would expect a sort of hand-wrestling from the two smart alecs, but that was not what happened. The whole thing was one-sided.

'Are you mad?' Advani said, guffawing.

'Not mad,' came the response of Jodu Bhattacharya.

'Spend so much money for nothing?

'Call it madness, if you like.'

'You've fallen for a Kashmiri woman.'

'That's it, isn't it?'

'Well, yes.'

'There are many Kashmiri beauties in Karachi. Prettier than Jamila.'

'Really?'

'Of course. You don't believe me? They weren't there before. But after the birth of Pakistan, by the grace of Allah, thanks to Jinnah sahib, there are thousands of them now. Do you know what's happened as a result?'

'What, Mr Advani?'

'The prices have fallen. Starting from four to six rupees. How many do you want? I have a client from Lahore, he orders one the moment he's here. Not everybody's cheap. Depends on the quality.'

'The law of the market.'

'True. But do you know how many Kashmiri refugees came in after the '65 Indo-Pak war? About two hundred thousand.'

'I didn't know that,' said Bhattacharya in perfect Urdu.

'At least two hundred thousand. As refugees move in, opportunities for pleasure-lovers increase.' Advani winked and smiled. 'All God's mercy,' he added. 'Thanks to Pakistan. But if there's beauty, it's in Kashmir. Do you know how much money you'd have to pay?'

'How much?'

'At least three thousand.'

'Don't worry about money.'

Jodu had made his confession to Advani at lunch-time the following day. They had a frank conversation.

Advani calculated that Jamila would agree to two thousand; another thousand was for his commission. It wasn't a bad deal. The night after, when the hotel did not have a cabaret, Jodu was invited by the daughter of Kashmir to Hotel Mumtaj.

Jodu Bhattacharya was stunned as he entered the room.

Even a veteran like him stood speechless.

Jamila was smiling mischievously. It was she who first opened her mouth.

'Take a seat.' Her forefinger pointed at the divan.