

People & Places

Carpets That Captivate

By Raana Haider

"Where thy carpet lies is thy home."

Persian proverb
"A thing of beauty is a joy forever." An overworked cliché it is; yet few earthly items epitomise the aptness of the saying than a Persian carpet. After all, even Cleopatra had her self rolled out of a carpet before Julius Caesar. These mirrors of creativity, these masterpieces are art forms uniquely made to be trod on. Carpet-making is a channel for expressing the craftsman's talent for controlling exuberance and imagination in both design and colour. It is an exercise undertaken by a genius. It is also a popular art and to a great extent, a tribal expression of art.

A Persian carpet has been defined as a hand-woven carpet or rug produced in Iran and characterised by fine warps and filling yarns, unusually tight, even pile made with the Sehna knot and a variety of floral, foliate, animal and avian designs woven in rich, harmonious colours. The word carpet is derived from *carpere* meaning 'to pluck or seize' in Latin; implying the plucking of wool. The word reflects the fact that traditionally for centuries wool has been used for making carpets.

Out of necessity was born art. The numerous nomadic tribes that once wandered the great expanse of land created floor and wall coverings to protect themselves from the bitter winters of a forbidding landscape. There are mountains with snow-covered

peaks and rocky slopes accompanied by fierce winds. There are also areas of parched wilderness where nomads roamed from oasis to oasis in search of waterholes for themselves and their flocks of sheep, goats and camels. Warm colours and artistic designs provided some relief in an otherwise harsh environment. Carpets in the tents were sat on, slept on, used as door coverings and wall hangings and used to keep warm. Carpets were also used as barter in exchange for other necessities of life. They were essential items in a constant battle for survival.

Carpets evolved over time from being an item of basic necessity to one of wealth, conspicuous consumption and investment. Persian carpets are popularly known as an Iranian's 'stocks and shares.' In times of need, they can be sold off. Persian carpets (a matter of the purse) have also become an integral part of affluent interior décor globally. From the tents of nomads to the palaces of potentates, Persian carpets have a colourful history. A most prized possession, it was treasured for the immense measure of beauty and warmth that they brought to surroundings of harsh extreme.

Persian carpets were regular features of the caravan trade that passed through the region. A major centre of the flourishing commerce was Tabors in Azerbaijan in the northwest of Iran. Tabriz was a gateway to the West, since it lay on one of the principal trade routes from Persia to Turkey and then onwards to Europe. To the East lay the towns

of Mashad in the Kohorasan province and Heart, oasis towns en route to Turkestan and China. This was the Carpet Route that for centuries passed through ancient Persia.

There are two major traditions in the carpet industry; Oriental and Western. The older is Oriental including carpets from central Asia, Middle East, Sub-Continent, China and North Africa. The Western tradition is derived from the Oriental and was established much later. Marco Polo the Venetian traveller of the thirteenth century judged that Asia Minor produced "the best and the handsomest carpets in the world." The carpet trade with the West took off in the sixteenth century. In the West, carpets were originally used as coverings for beds, chests tables and other furniture. Only since the early eighteenth century were carpets associated with floors. The reasoning appears to be that these works of art were too precious to be left on the floor to be walked on. They deserved to be shown off as objects of art.

Professor Rudenko discovered the earliest known oriental carpet in 1949 during archaeological excavations of burial mounds in the Altai Mountains in Siberia. The carpet dates back to the fifth century BC. Robbers raided the tomb but left aside the carpet. Through the opening, water froze and the carpet was mercifully preserved. This ancient carpet is known as the Pazyryk carpet. It has a wooden pile and is knotted with the Turkish Chiroides knot. Its central field is a deep red colour and it has two wide borders, one depicting deer and the other

Persian horseman. The Pazyryk carpet hangs at the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia.

Historical records show that the Achaemenian court of Cyrus the Great at Pasargade was decked with magnificent carpets. This was over 2500 years ago. Alexander

cut into small fragments and divided among the victorious soldiers as booty.

The Mongols invasion of Persia in the thirteenth century wrought havoc in every artistic domain. Carpet-making went into a sharp decline. Yet later Mongol rulers



Nomads on the move

the Great is said to have been dazzled by the carpets in the tomb area of Cyrus the Great at Pasargade. By the sixth century, Persian carpets of wool or silk were renowned in court circles throughout the region. The 'spring or winter' carpet of Khosrow was made for the main audience hall of the palace at Ctesiphon (now in Iraq). It depicted a formal garden. With the defeat of the Persians by Arabs, Ctesiphon changed hands. The carpet was taken by the Arabs,

attracted the best artisans with lavish royal support for their palaces in Central Asia. The apex of the art of carpet-making occurred in the sixteenth century in Iran under the Safavid dynasty. Shah Abbas established a royal carpet factory in Esfahan and hired master craftsmen. Esfahan was then 'a paradise of art and beauty.' A unique carpet of the period is known as the Ardebil carpet dated 1539. It was the handwork of Maaqsud Kashanim,

an inhabitant of Kashan. The masterpiece was made for Sheikh Safi-ud-Din from Ardebil. It is recognised as the oldest Persian carpet in the world. A detailed star medallion dominates and elaborate system of stems and flowers on a vivid indigo field. Roger Stevens in 'Land of the Great Sophy' rejoices in the beauty of this woven work of art. "The great Ardebil carpet now in the Victoria and Albert Museum whose splendid sunburst with its subsidiary satellites is like a vision of the firmament framed in an enormous window." Another smaller similar carpet is housed at the Los Angeles County Museum. While the carpet industry dates back to more than 2500 years, only fragments remain of carpets woven earlier than the seventeenth century.

As the seventeenth century wore on there was increasing demand for more luxurious and refined carpets both in Iran and abroad. The peak of artistic attainment then petered off. By the mid-nineteenth century, quality was sacrificed for quantity. Cheap artificial dyes, low quality wool, chemical washing and poor design combined to poorly affect the carpet industry.

Traditionally, sheep wool but also camel and goat hair has been used for the weaving of carpets. Luxury carpets were later woven with silk pile. Simple tools are needed for the hand-manufacture of carpets. So informs us 'Persian Rugs and Carpets.' "They are a knife, a beater and shears. The knife is used to cut the threads of the knot. It is made entirely of metal and may have a hook at the end of the

blade to assist in the formation of the knot. The beater consists of a series of metal blades, the points of which are splayed to form a set of teeth. It is used to tighten the threads of the weft against a line of knots. The wide-bladed flat shears are used to clip the pile of the carpet."

Also traditionally, only natural dyes were used for the colouring of wool. Dyeing materials included mineral pigments, insect and animal derivatives and vegetable and plant products, such as, leaves, bark roots, fruits, flowers and plants. These dyes were much in use till the nineteenth century for the colouring of weaving yarns; although, synthetic dyes came slowly on the scene from as far back as the sixteenth century. The resistance to the use of chemical dye for the wool exist to this day. Present day Persian carpet buyers frequently ask whether the wool is natural vegetable dye or chemical dye. Synthetic dyes became popular for its low-cost and brilliant colour. However, the colour's durability is limited; the colours fade and deteriorate fast. The use of artificial dyes market and decline in the quality of carpets.

It has to be recognised that the origins of carpet weaving lay with nomads as a product of necessity. "Necessity is the Mother of Invention; it was only over time that the utilitarian nature of the carpet was superseded by its aesthetic value, as both appreciation and market prices rose significantly, slowly some of the production of carpets moved to urban organised workshops. Earlier all carpet-weaving had

been carried out in scattered nomadic communities. While carpets are both an urban and a nomadic expression of art, kilims/gloms are purely nomadic, pursuits. Each carpet weaving family is known for its carpet designs; motifs, patterns and weaving skills- using gentle roses, brilliant sunshine, resplendent flowers, green leaves, birds, all 'divine blessings.' The designs are closely guarded family secrets. Moths and years of painstaking work goes into the creation of a single carpet.

There are two classifications of carpet-making. One is flat-woven including tapestry, brocade and embroidery and secondly, knotted pile waving. The earliest carpets were always flat-surfaced weaves. The earliest pile carpets from the Middle East date from the middle of the thirteenth century. Geometric designs of squares, octagons, tendrils are found in all carpet art of Asia Minor and Central Asia. An essential characteristic of Oriental carpets is hand-knotting. Such knots are either Senneh, the Persian knot or Chiorides, the Turkish knot. It is critical to consider three factors in the creation of a carpet. The persons who orders it, the person who creates it and the person who uses it. This dimension of carpet-making referred to in "The Sofreh of Kamo" by Parviz Tanovoli was a revelation to me.

Raana Haider is the wife of the Bangladesh Ambassador to Iran. To be continued

Fiction

The Golden Hair

Ellie was scrutinising every bit of Sujan's emotion. Theirs was a love marriage. They knew each other a little too much. From Day 1 at the university in Dhaka, they had grown up together. Two teens becoming man and woman together. Ellie knew that Sujan was a horrible liar. He hardly could hide his expressions. Sujan's confused look somewhat subdued Ellie's anger. She was completely shattered. She looked at Sujan who still had the hair in his hand. Ellie reached for his left hand and placed it on her head.

By Shamsad Mortuza

THE moment Sujan walked into the room, he felt a heavy cloud hovering over Ellie's shoulder. He could well assume that a round of shower had already taken place. Sujan threw his backpack onto the sofa, picked up their toddler Mithi from the carpet, and started cuddling her. Whenever Sujan came from outside, Mithi was sure to be at the door. Ba-ba! That's the only thing that she could say. It was funny because this ten-monther baby had become fond of her father in just three days. They had been separated for nearly six months. When Sujan left Dhaka for California, Mithi was just four months old. Practically, she had no memory of her father before coming here apart from all those photographs that she had seen in family albums.

Ellie by then had entered the bedroom and slammed the door. Though not a stranger to the sulky self of his wife, Sujan was rather surprised by its timing. He searched his memory to understand what might possibly go wrong. Usually in circumstances like this, he was quick to figure out things. This time his reason failed him. He could not remember anything that would have offended Ellie to unleash wrath. Ellie had just got here last Sunday. The family reunion after six months of separation promised some quality time, which they well enjoyed without any significant difference of opinion.

Sujan's instinct told him not to approach Ellie when she was radiating with anger. Now what could possibly go wrong! Think, Sujan think! Things were just fine in the morning when the couple had breakfast together. Sujan made toasts and scrambled eggs. He laid the table. The couple even set a plate for Mithi. Last night Ellie and Sujan bought a highchair for Mithi, and it was the family's first real formal breakfast at the dining table. Mithi had her Gerber jar food of chicken macaroni followed by the desert jar of Hawaiian Delight. The couple was excited because Mithi seemed to relish the jar food. She was rather choosy about food and their parents had repeatedly reminded

them to give chicken and vegetable *khichuri* to Mithi to help her growth. Since Mithi had liked the food, the couple was relieved that they would not have to trouble the cooking.

After breakfast, Sujan had to go to the university for a class. He came back right after class. He did not join his Professor for lunch. Usually, after Wednesday classes the whole class join Prof. Holm to nearby restaurants for lunch where they engage in afresh round of postmortem session of the class. Sujan had excused himself to have lunch with his wife and kid. And there he was - confronting a steaming kettle.

Young Mithi had also felt the stiff air that filled the room. She clung to her baba as close as she could. Sujan knocked and reached for the doorknob. "Ellie," Sujan softly called his wife. Inside the room, Ellie was hiding her face in the pillow. He leaned down and tapped her shoulder. "What's wrong?" It was just like walking into a booby trap as Ellie exploded like a land mine. "You bastard. I came all the way from home, took all the pain to get here."

It hit him like a bolt from the blue. Taken aback by the swearing, Sujan got back to his feet. Mithi started crying. Sujan patted her shoulder and took some moments to find back his composure. "Calm down!" "Calm down...you son of a bitch!" Sujan felt a sudden rush of blood. He wanted to slap Ellie and shut her big mouth once and for all. He left Mithi on her cot and reached for Ellie. "Are you insane? What's wrong?" "This is what that is wrong, you pig." Ellie was holding a long strand of golden hair. It was a girl's hair for sure. "Where did you get this?" "In your pillow cover, where else! Who was it? Tell me...please. I insist."

Sujan's mind began to spin like a wheel. There was no way that the hair should come to his bed. Before Ellie came to America, it was true that some of Sujan's friends had visited his apartment. Some of his friends were even blondes. But that did not explain the presence of the hair in the pillow cover. They never came to the bedroom excepting when he was showing them his apartment. Right before Ellie came, Vivian helped Sujan to buy some things for his wife and

child. Sujan didn't have a car and Vivian knew that. She gave him a ride for shopping. She was the one who helped him to choose the baby cot and the jar food. Was it possible that the hair belonged to Vivian? Could be. Hairs do fly, right?

Ellie was scrutinising every bit of Sujan's emotion. Theirs was a love marriage. They knew each other a little too much. From Day 1 at the university in Dhaka, they had grown up together. Two teens becoming man and woman together. Ellie knew that Sujan was a horrible liar. He hardly could hide his expressions. Sujan's confused look somewhat subdued Ellie's anger. She was completely shattered. She looked at Sujan who still had the hair in his hand. Ellie reached for his left hand and placed it on her head.

"For God's sake, Sujan, please, take a vow. Tell me whose hair is it?" Sujan looked at Ellie. Her eyes were pleading for the truth but Sujan did not know the truth. And he knew any reply good or bad was sure to cause another spark to ignite Ellie. Mithi was crying for her ma from the baby cot. Sujan did not try to remove his hand from Ellie's head. That would have been a disaster because she was reading his body language. In fact, Sujan was virtually under a human lie detector.

"I don't know how this hair got here." Sujan replied looking straight into Ellie's eyes. He was trying all possible body languages to convince Ellie that he was speaking the truth. But the evidence was too hard to ignore. "Liar, cheat!" Ellie just threw herself on the bed once again and started weeping. Sujan walked towards Mithi and picked her up. She was crying for her mother. Sujan just felt like having some fresh air. The room was suffocating. He also remembered that these apartment walls were not thick enough to contain the noise. Any of the neighbours could report the commotion to the police, and there would be an unnecessary hassle to explain domestic violence. Sujan decided to take Mithi for a walk and allow Ellie some time to settle down. He got the stroller out and put the child in it.

"I hope you will come back to your senses. Believe me, I have no

clue about the hair." Sujan took Mithi to a corner store and bought her a candy. He got himself a coke and started heading for a nearby park. It was actually a little warm to be out with a child. He put Mithi on a swinger and started probing into his mind. He thought of all of his classmates with golden hair who had come to his place.

Sujan remembered the night before he left for the US. Ellie actually made him promise not to get involved with any women. Sujan enjoyed being handcuffed to his wife. It reassured him of how much she cared for him. He was mature enough to draw lines in a relationship. So there was never a question of getting into anything improper. Besides, Sujan had noticed that Americans in general were very careful about their personal boundaries.

Sujan's friends gave him companion to overcome his homesickness. Abby and her husband came to his place quite a few times. So did Mary Ann and her boy friend. He had also been to their places. Vivian and Deb were single. But Sujan could count Deb out of the list because she was a brunette. Sujan made fast friends with these people who seemed sensible, intelligent, and genuinely interested in knowing him and his culture. Sujan had not kept this friendship a secret from his wife.

Ellie trusted Sujan. But with the hair, the long golden hair in the pillow cover, how was he going to establish his fidelity. Mithi was getting hungry. It was her mealtime. Sujan started back for the apartment, although he had no idea of how he was going to face Ellie all over again. When Mithi and Sujan got back to the apartment, Ellie was on the phone. She was talking to her cousin in Dallas, giving details of her find. The moment she saw Sujan in the room, she started using slang and began portraying him as a sex monster. Mithi crawled up to her mother. Ellie started telling her version of the story to Mithi. Although, Mithi was too young to follow her mother, Ellie just went on with her version of the genesis of the golden hair. Sujan could not hold it any longer.

"Enough is enough. I told you that I have no clue about the hair. Besides, you know my friends. Yes,

they have been to my place but just for a friendly chat or for a cup of tea. That's it. I am not a lecherous beast. And I don't like your insinuating... I swear it. I swear on my daughter that I have not done anything to jeopardise our marriage." Sujan was panting after saying all these. He wasn't planning to say anything. But somehow he felt light after letting it go out of his heart. He felt relieved. Apparently, it did some magic on Ellie too. She picked up the child indifferently. She put a jar in the micro-oven and started spoon feeding her.

Sujan, on the other hand, entered the bathroom and splashed some water on his face. He looked at himself in the mirror. He often did this to have a self-conversation. But this time the image on the mirror was silent. It was not responding. Suddenly, he noticed something on the hinges of the bathroom door. Hair, more hair, golden hair. He knelt down and picked them up. There were two different sizes - short and long. Male and female. "Ellie," Sujan shouted. "Look what I have found!"

Ellie came. "See, these must have been of the residents who lived here before." Ellie looked at the hair. Her eyes were in tears. This time they were of joy. "Oh! Sujan. It hurt me so much." Then she did something very unusual. She pulled off the mattress of the bed. There were more hair both short and long, all golden. Then she said that she gave Mithi the pillow to play it on the carpet. Surely, the pillow cover must have picked up the hair from the carpet.

Who knew that the chestnut-brown carpet was hiding so many dangerous things? Sujan didn't have a vacuum cleaner. He moved into this furnished apartment in a hurry. He didn't even allow his apartment owner to clean the room properly. And the all-carpetted, centrally air-conditioned apartment looked so clean. Who knew that it had so many souvenirs, so many stories of its own.

The couple decided to get a vacuum cleaner the next day. It's simply not worth getting dirty with somebody else's dirt.

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Reflection

Travels and Travails

Several daily newspapers of Calcutta flashed the news of Jhumpa Lahiri's wedding in Calcutta as their first-page leader, complete with a colourful photo of the happy couple. First I thought: O happy Bengal! You still honour your poets as the ancient civilisations used to do. And for a moment I remained in this innocent bliss of satisfaction. Then it dawned on me that not any writer's marriage is accorded such flattering coverage. Only expatriates who have "made it good" abroad, who have "done the country proud", are subjected to such exaggerated honours.

By Martin Kämpchen

O, happy Bengal! I felt like exclaiming, when I read about Jhumpa Lahiri's marriage with her American groom in Calcutta. The daughter of Bengali immigrants to the United States, she grew up in an American environment, attended American schools and calls New York her home. Yet, living with her parents must have reminded her on every single day that they are different, and that she too is different, from any "normal" American citizen. This friction between the need to retain their indigenous cultural environment, and the urge to assimilate themselves to the cultural climate they have chosen to live in, has generated Jhumpa Lahiri's fine stories in her book "Interpreter of Maladies". Last year this book earned her the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

It is not a book of high drama and deep-running tensions - far from it. It is a superbly understated, delicately balanced account of the immigrants' everyday life. It also contains the story "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" of a Bangladeshi academic on a fellowship to study the foliage of New England. Mr. Pirzada used to spend the evenings in the Boston home of an Indian family. As it happened, it was autumn 1971, and the Indian family and the Bangladeshi gentleman together watched the momentous political developments in Bangladesh on television. Initially it created tension between the two men; national pride struggled with the realisation that, after all, they are people of the same subcontinent, the same language and culture and should consider these happenings as a common problem.

There was an uproar of jubilation in the Indian media

when the Pulitzer Prize was declared last year. Why? I wondered. Isn't Jhumpa an American citizen whose skills where groomed in America, and whose material is drawn from American life? Where is the cause for pride?

Well, in the first place, two of her stories are situated in Calcutta, "A Real Durwan" and "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar". They tell the pathetic story of two poverty-stricken, elderly women, Boori Ma and Bibi, who live in forgotten corners of an apartment house, each in her own way struggling to eke out a dignified existence. Both of them lose this struggle. In my estimation these are the best stories of Jhumpa's collection. Secondly, in her interviews she told us of her periodic visit to the city of her parents, her emotional closeness to her Bengali heritage. And in fact, the two stories reveal intimate, penetrating insights into the Bengali psyche and the life-style of the lower middle-class. It appears as if she spent a lifetime among the people she writes about.

Hence it is indeed a reason for satisfaction that such perceptive stories on Bengal life have been honoured with a prestigious American prize. Quite apparently American readers who do not know Bengal, have recognised these narratives as a valid representation of human life. Thus, with these stories they have come closer to the consciousness of Bengal life than they could ever hope to with the help of treatises, essays, lectures, or documentaries. Good literature always universalises its subject: here, Bengal life represents humanity as a whole. A reader from the American Mid-West is able to empathise with the miseries of Boori Ma in a ramshackle apartment house of Calcutta.

So far, so good. Now comes the

strange part of my story. Several daily newspapers of Calcutta flashed the news of Jhumpa Lahiri's wedding in Calcutta as their first-page leader, complete with a colourful photo of the happy couple. First I thought: O happy Bengal! You still honour your poets as the ancient civilisations used to do. And for a moment I remained in this innocent bliss of satisfaction. Then it dawned on me that not any writer's marriage is accorded such flattering coverage. Only expatriates who have "made it good" abroad, who have "done the country proud", are subjected to such exaggerated honours. We have seen and heard the riotous praise which was heaped on Professor Amartya Sen in West-Bengal and Bangladesh after he received the Nobel Prize. The psychology is transparent: Here comes an American writer of Bengali parentage who loves the traditions of her ancestors enough to want to wed in them, and a whole society feels flattered. The failings and shortcomings of one's own Bengali society, one's own individual lack of success and will to succeed are being "undone" by vicariously identifying with another Bengali who is a winner. She is what the rest could have become, had they only tried and been given a chance. Idolising her is a form of self-pity and a rather sad way of expressing cultural pride.

A more confident and culturally self-assured human being would probably find it silly to extoll a writer's wedding. After all, this is part of her private life which has no bearing on her work as a writer. And she is a young girl with one book to her credit, not yet a person of national importance. Anyway, have a happy married life, Jhumpa! And don't forget to continue your writing.

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