

SHORT STORY

Feeqa's Death

NADIR ALI (translated from the Punjabi by Moazzam Sheikh)

I dreamed of Feeqa today after so many years...the message a dream brings is unique and complex each time. Feeqa's case, however, is different. I had erased both his life and death from my memory. But he borrowed a new mask this time.

A water-carrier all his life, he sat today as Husaina Mehr's helper at the fruit shop. I picked up a melon and held it out to him in the dream. But Feeqa spoke, 'Little master, you didn't pick up the melon from this shop, so I can't take any money for this. Enjoy!' Laughing, he turned to Hasina Mehr, 'You haven't kept melons here, Mehr. It must belong to another shop,' and then he said to me, 'You are mistaken, boss,' and laughed. Husaina peered inside the shop and found no melons there. The dream ended. I woke up happy with a free melon.

Dreams are strange enactments of life's song and dance. Even if we pick apart each strand of the rope, we won't understand them. This is the mistake psychologists make. They'd say it is the mother symbol or the sex symbol. But both these thrusts are wrong...Each strand is a different song and when you knit these strands into the rope of life, each twist then manifests a different dance! The thing that was that Feeqa had stolen a melon for me once from Husaina's field, which was situated behind the shop. From that point on we were always on the prowl to steal melons at night. So Feeqa had reminded me, today, of a favour from the forgotten past by giving me the stolen melon...But there was another twist to it too...Feeqa had committed a murder which only Husaina Mehr and I had witnessed.

Swai Ram's shop was next to Mehr's. At dawn, the thoroughfare was completely empty. It was time for the cart delivering ice blocks to show up. Husaina Mehr unloaded fruit boxes inside to stack them up. He had had a quarrel with Sheeda the ice-vendor the morning before which Feeqa and I had seen. I had taken our cows to the City Park, where grazing was prohibited, and was headed back at the first hint of morning. At that time, Sheeda was unloading the ice blocks and piling them up on the platform of Swai Ram's shop. Sheeda was on dope, had an ugly mug, and enjoyed cussing with his pig-like face. Mehr was a simple man and didn't like messing with anyone. 'O, Mehr, let me shove this little mango up your ass!' This was enough to invite trouble. Mehr grabbed a piece of brick from the shop and hurled it at Sheeda. It hit him on the forehead. Feeqa and I rushed, pushing the two away from each other...Let me go and unload the ice, and if I don't return to shove a bamboo up your ass, Mehr, I ain't my father's son.'

'Son, you don't seem to be one anyway,' Mehr dared him.

Early next morning Mehr and Sheeda were grabbing each other. Feeqa stood in the midst disentangling them even before I arrived. Sheeda's eyes were bloodshot and his temper was high. He was a habitual criminal and Mehr always tried to restrain him. Those were the Partition days; besides Sheeda had his eyes on Swai Ram. He



even said to Feeqa a few times, 'Shouldn't we take off the bloody Hindu's dhoti?' On a few occasions he didn't pay for the soda bottles and had also demanded twice as much for the ice delivery the last time. cared, Swai Ram dished out the money, but complained to Mehr. The friendship between Mehr and Swai Ram was deep and time-tested...

We used to listen to the news on Swai Ram's radio, and the songs as well. Swai Ram would read the news aloud from 'Parbaat' every day. Most people on the square were illiterates like Feeqa and Mehr. Swai Ram was an educated and political person. The faces of Mahatma Gandhi and the Muslim Frontier Gandhi had been painted on each side of the 'Royal Soda Water Factory' signboard by Sarwar Painter. Most of us, including the painter, did not even know who the other Gandhi was.

While painting, Sarwar Painter gradually became a Muslim League leader, and while listening to the songs and reading the

newspaper, I too became a neighbourhood leader. See, how I have digressed...the digressing thread, however, has a connection not only with the murder Feeqa committed but with his death as well.

Later I learned from Feeqa that Sheeda had cursed and challenged the moment he arrived. The whole thing got out of control as he started harassing Mehr. Mehr and Sheeda were exchanging blows; Feeqa too got embroiled in it though his intent actually was to pry them away from each other.

I arrived at the scene soon after and immediately attempted to disengage them. Suddenly, Sheeda's hand reached for the cart. The ice pick was in his grip. 'Sheeda's holding the ice pick, Feeqa!' I cried in alarm.

Mehr was an older man and heavyset, but Feeqa was simply lightning made flesh. He twisted Sheeda's wrist and, grabbing the pick, stabbed him three times in the chest. The blood left its splashes on Feeqa's and Mehr's clothes. Blood poured out of Sheeda's nose as well and he fell

back, writhing. He raised his hand in the air once, then went cold. 'What the hell has happened, Mehr? He's dead.'

Though I was the youngest, I hadn't become the neighbourhood leader for nothing. 'Run, you two. No one has seen it.'

Feeqa was still shit scared. It had all happened in a flash solely because of his speed. Come to think of it, he had not quarreled with Sheeda. But he was loyal friend, and his friendship was deep with Mehr. He used to sprinkle water in front of everyone's shops, including Mehr's he filed their pitchers as well, but of late there was not much demand for a water-carrier. Mehr always helped out and looked after him.

Well, what had to come to pass had already happened. Mehr and Feeqa both ran off. I felt unusually brave standing at a distance.

There was no one around. the first few horse-drawn carriages were about to arrive...

The early morning walkers were usually Hindus; however, they rarely

came out of their houses for walks in the terrifying summer of 1947.

I tethered the cows. As I looked out from the rooftop, I spotted a tongawallah shouting aloud, 'Murder, there has been a murder!' Mehr sauntered out of his house slowly and mingled with the crowd. Feeqa too had filled his water sack again and, after a fleeting glance, began sprinkling the street as though nothing had happened. I was impatient to reach the place of action and, telling Mother about the commotion at the corner, rushed over to the spot to take a second look at Sheeda. His eyes were wide open and the open flaps of his dhoti had left him denuded in the front. Dhurrey Shah the tongawallah, who was the big bad boy of the neighbourhood, covered the front and said, 'Someone's finished him off. Mehr, go and break the news to his family. We'll catch the murderer, rest assured. What mother***** would've dared to do this in our neighbourhood? Sheeda's murderer must be from some other village. I know them well. Dhurey Shah is still alive.' He went on with his sermon.

Feeqa, Mehr, and I communicated to each other through our eyes. Feeqa had become further disoriented when I saw him in the evening. I tried to calm him down, 'I haven't told anyone, and Mehr is not going to either. No one suspects you.'

The police carried out a cursory investigation. Blood was cheap in those days for murders had become an everyday affair. The knowledge of this secret made me feel like a big boy. 'Feeqa, I haven't even told Mother.'

'Tell her if you want the entire neighbourhood to know,' Feeqa laughed. Mehr had always been a man of few words. Swai Ram felt safer now, after Sheeda's death.

Finally, Swai Ram was the sole casualty of our area in 1947. Dhurrey Shah had been breaking locks on the morning of 15 August...Among the Hindu shops, Swai Ram's was the only one open. He decided to lock it up. Dhurrey Shah was drunk. He came up and stabbed Swai Ram. This was the second murder I had seen in a week.

The whole world changed. I became a member of the National Volunteer Corps. Feeqa became loquacious. He would sing all night long. Walking around, he'd beat the rhythm on his water sack, 'akhyan mila ke, jiya bharma ke, challe nahn jana!' yet he had changed somehow. Mehr told me six months later that he had taken to drinking rotgut. The affliction finished him off within a year. I moved from the city to Lahore and then I became a government officer. While on vacation, I'd visit Mehr to buy fruit. His mention of Feeqa would bring tears to my eyes, 'Boss, a good man's life is tough.' Mehr was a good man too; he left the world quickly. Feeqa faded from my memory. Last night, he gave me the melon -- an excuse to remember me, and be remembered.

Reprinted from *A Letter From India* reviewed below. Nadir Ali is a poet/short story writer who lives in Lahore. Moazzam Sheikh, the editor of the volume, lives in San Francisco.

BookReviews

Setting a benchmark

NUZHAT AMIN MANNAN

A letter from India
Contemporary Short Stories from Pakistan, edited by Moazzam Sheikh; Penguin India, Delhi; 2004; pp. 168; Rs 200.

In this collection of contemporary short stories from Pakistan, 'India' features on the title and cover and the last story is about Bangladesh! Add to that the fact that the writers do away with being reverential or meek. It is a showcase of how Pakistani writers engage with a more 'contemporary' Pakistan, one that interacts rather than merely react to the world at large. It introduces new and old talents, produces unexpected themes, promises 'tradition' and a makeover. The collection on all accounts will seem like a bold 'coming out' venture by some of Pakistan's important writers in the vernacular (Urdu, Punjabi, Sindhi, Siraiki) and in English.

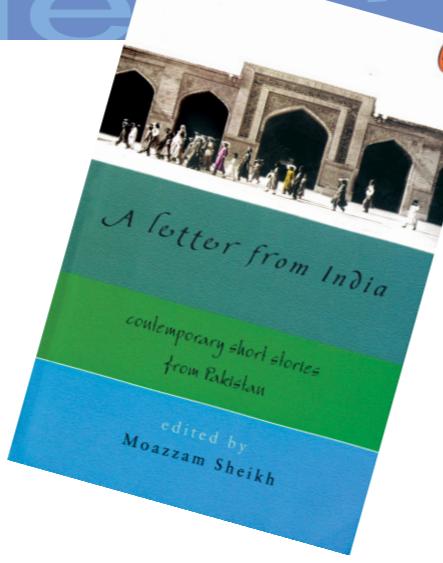
The collection takes its title from the Urdu story written by Iftikhar Hussain called 'A Letter from India' (translated admirably by the collection's editor, Moazzam Sheikh). The story is about the

anxiety of an old man watching his brood disperse into the wilderness of the world. The narrator signs his name as 'Nameless Quran Ali' and grieves over the vicissitudes of history and the tangible erosion his clan/family suffers. He helplessly rails at borders, overseas jobs, disgraceful marriages, the shameless modern world: 'our entire family can now be considered half-partridge, half-quail, and each one of us is a mourner for we have lost our pedigree and also the wisdom of knowing who we were' (79). Even though he believes 'One has never seen a dispersed family come together' he gives his nephew (the one he is writing the letter to) a daunting mission. To do as Ali has done his entire life --keep records, of (dead and alive) every member of this dark-fated family, to track out 'which member is still living about in which country' or 'has made which country his home' (80). Ali, with his zesty exclamations, ruddy-faced exasperation and volatile roar of affection is like a delightful Polonius, a stickler for order in the face of chaos and change, affably prescribing 'cures' for warped times. Sheikh's

translation is so vivid that the finer nuances belonging to the Urdu text come through even for people who do not read Urdu.

The collection gives us powerful stories. Like Nadir Ali's 'Feeqa's Death' (translated from Punjabi) in which local brawls hone in on larger Partition politics, or like Asad Mohammad Khan's story 'The Squatter'

that explores the lives and last breaths of two castoffs, one a Muslim 'bastard' and the other a Hindu 'ravaged by skin disease' striking a friendship. In 'If Truth be Told' the story revolves around the journeys the narrator makes, feeling first scared, then uncomfortable, and then wearied out in trying to find his cantankerous mother who, after a quarrel-too-many with the family, had walked out. He roams in and shrines and holy places, knowing his mother often resorted to them and had made friends



there. The mother does not turn up and the twist is that the narrator slowly finds himself and comes around acknowledging an unnerving truth about himself. Such stories and characters show extraordinary Tolstoyesque human warmth that abundantly makes up for the lighthearted humour that otherwise seems to be absent in *A Letter from India*.

Three more stories from the collection (and there are nineteen) deserve a special mention. Among

them, Moazzam Sheikh's own story called 'The Barbarians and the Mule'. This is a tale about a rookie reservist (failed novelist, disappointed in love as well) who faces his first day at work handling a 'barbarian', a middle-aged Palestinian called Yassin and his ten year old son. Despite his jitters, the rookie makes an 'Oscar-level performance' (10) by having Yassin at gun point strip and do the unthinkable in front of his son.

Sheikh handles the prose well. The story is uncluttered, the politics unmduddled. The other one is Soniah Naheed Kamal's story called 'Papa's Girl' that will either make people reel or retch (depending on the reader's stomach since the author does broach a delicate topic). The narrator is the archetypal chauvinist. He recounts a trip he had taken as a boy with his father to Thailand where he had encountered the father's Thai woman (the narrator calls her 'Dodo-head'). The young lad had stumbled on a scene in which Dodo-head was lying on a bed smelling like 'baby shrimps in brine.' She looked like a witch, 'stiff seaweed' spewing from her

'cinder valley'. He remembers to order his wife-to-be to get depilatory treatment. On his nuptial bed he winces at his clean wife all 'goosebumpy like raindrops on a waxed window' (18) and decides to teach her abstinence. So he pats her and turns to sleep to dream about soiled things.

There are unsuccessful stories too in the collection. For example, Fahmida Riaz's (a well known poet) bizarre story called 'Hieroglyphics'. She conjures an Eastern woman visiting Berkeley. Laila makes a courtesy call on a Jewish professor who greets her with a dry, preposterously-worded welcome. While discussing 'scripts and languages' the professor checks out the Eastern woman: she smells of sandalwood, wears a costume with glasswork and a gauzy, organza dupatta. The Eastern woman notices the 'golden hair peeping out from under his upturned sleeves' and the three buttons of his shirt that were open (151). The conversation that the author had meant to sound serious, and possibly academic, is as stilted and sounds absurd as the professor's greeting. A little later, as Laila prepares to leave, Time has played its trick.

We've been separated' (162). The story could have ended there, which sadly it does not. For there is to be another rhapsody, celebrating Bengali womanhood in Daisy ('she is the most beautiful woman, the beauty of Bengal...who showed me to see 'no' from 'yes') [whatever that means!] and a paean to the magic of Bengal. Moazzam Sheikh, in his Introduction to the collection says that he had to cast aside many good writers and their stories. That a story like 'Path' found its path into a serious collection like *A Letter from India* really baffles! There is a lot to compensate for stories like 'Spot', 'Mangoes in the Time of Winter', 'Barriers that Remained' or 'The Buffalo' that are puzzlingly artificial. The collection in conclusion is a mix, of good writing with attitude and bad writing writhing helplessly, it has some very memorable stories and some alas, very forgettable ones. *A Letter From India* on the whole, however, without a doubt sets a benchmark.

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Letter from MUMBAI

On living with and learning from marginalized communities

MENKA SHIVDASANI

When Randhir Khare was seven years old, his grandfather took him on his knee just a few days before he died, and pointed to the sky. 'You must be like that star,' he said, 'bright and sparkling, but remote. It is so visible, and yet so untouched.' Over the years, Randhir learned the value of these words, taking his strength from nature and the sky, cutting through the clutter of city existence and exploring primal ways of being. Once, in a time of grief after his first wife passed away in an accident, he carried David Thoreau's *Walden* to the wilderness of the Upper Bhavani of the Nilgiris, and, perched high on a rock overlooking a shallow valley and a stream, read the words: 'I went to the woods, because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived...' It would be well, perhaps, if we were to spend more of our days and nights without any obstruction between us and the celestial bodies, if the poet did not speak so much from under the roof..." Randhir knew the wilderness would never let him down. One evening, when he felt the need to make peace with himself and be still, he packed a haversack, took a bus to Nashik on the border of Gujarat, slept at the bus station and caught the first bus to the Dangs jungle. Though he had

bought a ticket for Ahwa, he decided to step off at any place that seemed special --rugged, densely forested, or something that simply appealed to his senses. He found it when the driver pulled over to pay his respects to a roadside deity --a wooded hillock beyond which the land seemed to fall away.

Randhir got off and did not look back. He simply traveled, by intuition, sleeping on rock with no food or water, until a few days later, while he was scooping the ground in a desperate attempt to quench his thirst, a bare-chested Bhil, from a community known for violence, found him and asked if he wanted water. The Bhil then not only helped him find some water underground, but also took him home and shared his meal with the game that he had hunted --palm civet.

Describing the experience in his book *The Dangs: Journeys Into the Heartland* (HarperCollins, Year 2000), Randhir tells of a policeman who warns him about how one should never trust a Bhil or a Bhilala, because they are 'criminal to the core'. The policeman says sarcastically: 'You have been around in those places. I wonder why you weren't robbed.'

The reason is not far to seek. As the author of 13 books of poetry, short fiction and travel explored during a talk in Mumbai this April on the factors that had influenced his writing: 'I have always had a feeling of empathy and connection with tribals and marginalized communities. We tend to blank

out small communities which have rich traditions.'

These connections have enriched his writing in subterranean and special ways. The back cover of his recent book of poems *River Day* (Grassroot Books, 2004) says: 'The poet's continued relationship, over the years, with people from the Indian sub-continent's marginal, forest-dwelling and nomadic communities and their living folkloric traditions has had a quiet but deep impact on his work, bringing it to mythic dimensions.'

From them he learned that every yard of land had its deep significance; that nature in all its forms had a purpose and a meaning; he learned the value of celebrating the community spirit from people who 'lived on the edge but were holding on to what they believed in'; he gained perceptions and insights that are being lost in a 'nation on the move', which rejects or appropriates everything that lies on the margins.

In the introduction to his book, Randhir says that *River Day* has three poems that grew out of his experiences traveling through Gujarat. 'These were intense and breath-taking times when I was exposed to people, experiences and feelings that had never occurred to me before,' he says. 'They tried me, tested me and almost succeeded in breaking me with the sheer power of their absurdity. Finally, I think they taught me how to be a more effective "survivor" and get on with my life.' He also learned the value of trusting his instincts: as

awards for Randhir along the way --the Sanskriti Award for Creative Writing and Pegasus, the gold medal for poetry given by the Union of Bulgarian Writers, among others --but his greatest rewards have been the riches gleaned from his warm, deep and sometimes painful experience with marginalized communities and their land, which have enriched his life and his writing.

As he says in the title poem *River Day*, walking down the bone-dry stone of the baked Khali Nadi in Kutch: 'Kutch, you frighten me With your unrelenting heat And stone and dust -- Footprinted by an ancient sea; You frighten me --and yet You teach me ways I never knew How to withstand and outlive death.'

At another venue, in a completely different context, the Malayalam poet and secretary of the Sahitya Akademi Prof K Satchidanandan also made a similar point about marginalized communities. 'I was with the Bhils of Gujarat,' he said on Friday, May 13. 'They have a way of apologizing to cows before milking them and to trees before plucking the fruits. They are supportive of nature; this is something we, the "civilised mainstream" should learn that land is sacred and Amunore is their land of the dead.'

What makes Randhir's writing unique is that his is a lived and shared experience, unlike say, a book like Uma Singh's *Between Worlds: Travels among Mediums, Shamans and Healers*, based on the Chamba region of Himachal Pradesh, which comes across more as a journalistic documentation, an observer's point of view.

There have been several



Ramayana and Mahabharata traditions. Then there was the Bhakti movement, a "people's attempt to create alternative religion" --it encompassed the lower castes, the marginalized, the women --those who rejected Sanskrit in favour of a people's language instead. Satchidanandan also spoke of the new post-modernist literature, the intrusion of the market in everyday life, a forced standardization of culture and the subtle authoritarianism of the state, among other things.

In the last 20 to 30 years, he pointed out, there have been three main strands --the progressive modernist strain with its literature of "broad commitment" and different ideologies (U R Ananthamurthy and Mahasweta Devi, for instance); Dalit writing, which began with Marathi but soon spread to other languages; and literature by women who were rewriting the patriarchal norms. "When we speak about Indian culture," Satchidanandan concluded, "we leave out a lot of people; we look at culture only as Hindu culture. But we need to relook at the marginalized, the subaltern minorities." It is these minorities, more often than not, who enrich the vast canvas of Indian literature.

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