

TRIBUTE

More human than human

Humayun Ahmed was the grandest of explorers of the human condition

INDRAJIT HAZRA

If coincidence is the occurrence of events that happen at the same time by accident but seem to have some connection, what does one call the non-occurrence of events that fail to happen at the same time by accident even though they seem to have some connection?

I have wondered about this ever since I discovered the works of Humayun Ahmed some six years ago purely by chance.

In 2005, I was making my annual pilgrimage at the Kolkata Book Fair with the express purpose of picking up my stock of new and old Bengali books that were not available in bookshops in the city of New Delhi I had made home since I left Kolkata in 1998. It was more out of curiosity than any real purpose that I walked into a stall selling books from Bangladesh. Like most Bengalis from West Bengal, my reading of modern and contemporary Bangladeshi literature was scandalously limited. I had read a couple of works by Taslima Nasreen and deeply admired Akhteruzzaman Elias' *Chilekothar Sepai* (The Soldier in the Attic) and *Khoabnama* (Dream Chronicles). Barring a few literary or academic folks, this was pretty much what most people knew about literature from 'oppar Bangla' (Bengal on the other side).

While flipping through a row of books, I chanced upon a slim hardcover with the silhouette of a man's face and a red blob inside his head on the cover. I had never heard of, let alone read anything by, the book's writer, Humayun Ahmed. With no blurb at the back or front flap of the book to guide me I started reading *Ami Ebong Amra* (I And We), an intriguing title enough, right there just to get an idea about how the tone of the writing was, since it was impossible to know anything about the storyline by flipping a couple of pages.

It starts with a character by the name of Mishir Ali conducting an experiment in which, since the last four days, he has been sprinkling three teaspoons of rice grains across the window ledge and then observ-

ing from a distance how out of the two sparrows that perch themselves on the ledge, one eats the rice grains, the other doesn't. The results of the experiment are the same each day: the male sparrow eats the grains, the female sparrow doesn't.

But it's the sudden shift in the second half of the first page that made me put my polythene packet with books in it down and continue reading. The writer had switched gears and like a clean, seamless shift in the shunting of a rail line, he was now talking about how Mishir Ali "was allergic to specialists". They were arrogant, dogmatic and started answering questions even before listening to the question fully. Then just after providing an illustration of such a specialist Mishir Ali had gone to so as to understand why the male and not the female sparrow always ate, there's another seamless shunting.

I learn about Mishir Ali's physician telling him, rather sceptically, that he should stop stressing, sleep earlier, rest more, stop smoking, listen to music, read light books and visit parks.

Shunt again to Mishir Ali sitting on a park bench in the afternoon reading "a 300-page book called *Laughter, Laughter, Laughter*". The book "has 2,000 jokes. He's progressed from the first page to page number 33 -- laughter hasn't come to him yet. The book costs him a hundred takas. It seems he's wasted a hundred takas."

By the time I turn another page or two or three, still rooted to the spot, and read about a strange man walking up to Mishir Ali and ultimately introduce himself as a psychopath who has killed two people and will be killing a third, I'm hooked. As I read Mishir Ali's staggeringly calm reply to the stranger in the park, "You've killed two. You'll kill a third. Go ahead. What's the point of telling me? It's not as if you need my permission," I recognised that I was reading something special, something that I realised that incredibly had been eluding me all this while in the form of an anti-coincidence.

Since 2006, I have read as many



Humayun Ahmed novels and stories I've managed to get my hands on. With the sheer number of titles that he left before his untimely death, I have hardly managed to get my foot in the door. But quite early on in my reading journey, I became aware of the fact that Ahmed's subject was humans. Not strange humans or degenerate humans or humans bordering on the inhuman. But Humans. And if in the process the spotlights shone directly on strangeness, degeneration and inhumanity, what his writings really uncover is how utterly and exhilaratingly 'normal' all this is.

If Mishir Ali, the teacher of clinical psychiatry at Dhaka University, is the laconic, asocial, Dr Jekyll of zen-like reason and explorer of the human mind solving mysteries, then Himu, Ahmed's other abiding character, is the jobless, aimless, anti-social, Mr Hyde of subversion fiercely guarding a moral universe under the threat of hypocrisy and good manners.

Ahmed created an astounding, lyrical character in Himu, a mix of Travis Bickle, the crusading-loner in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*, and those fiercely intelligent anti-heroes created by 40s-50s psychological crime fiction master Jim Thompson. I loved him from the very first moment I met him in 'Moyurakhhi' where he gets into a

car after being mistaken by a lady for someone else.

There's a madness in the method with which Ahmed lets Himu loose on the high society lady and her daughter, which continues as he is hauled for a while to the police station where he unleashes his intelligence and anti-authority credentials before the second-most potent symbol of the Establishment, the police -- the most potent being the family, of course.

One of the thrills of reading Ahmed is that it entails a breakdown of set notions -- whether about good and bad, hero and villain, or the rational and the irrational, real and unreal. This conscious blurring of demarcated lines is made most apparent, and arguably with the most creative force, in the novel, *Ami-y Mishir Ali* (It's Me Mishir Ali).

The two characters, Lilly and her much-older wheelchair-bound husband Sultan appear to us as unhinged. We aren't sure whether this is an impression we get because of their eccentric natures (and our standard reaction towards eccentricity ranging from the uncomfortable to the hostile). There are occasions in the story where Mishir Ali finds himself unable to differentiate between nightmares he's having and the cold hum of reality.

In the first Mishir Ali novel, *Debi*, the real-unreal divide completely breaks down in the mind of Nilu, the young wife of another older gentleman. Nilu finds herself leading a lonely marital life and is suffering from what seems a deep psychological trauma that has its source in a violent sexual encounter when she was a child. Ahmed unfurls the story through Mishir Ali's investigations that try to identify which is the cause of Nilu's simmering hysteria-schizophrenia and which is the effect.

But it's not only Ahmed's characters, icons not only in contemporary Bengali literature but contemporary literature as a whole that leave a searing mark. Ahmed was also an 'idea' writer. His science fiction and speculative writings remind me of the

stories of Ray Bradbury, where the 'science is just a prop used in the fiction to explore idea-puzzles.

Stories from the collection *Onhok*, for example, are really quick but deep diving expeditions into the human condition. In *Jadukar* (Magician), a boy meets an alien who let's him use his mind-reading machine to find out what his father and teacher are thinking after he is hiding from them as he has failed in his maths exam. Once he 'hears' his father and teacher both worry about him, he happily goes back to them, immune to their shoutings and beatings that follow -- because "he is now sure that all this is not what they really think. In any case, he could clearly see in the lantern's light his father's wet eyes. He was searching for him in tears".

So many of Ahmed's characters, like Bablu the 'thought-reading' boy, find comfort in what they think the people around them are thinking; while many others of Ahmed's characters, like Bablu's father, do something and think something else.

I've had a late start with Humayun Ahmed and reading all of his remarkable and astonishing works will be as satisfying as it will be depressing for me.

Satisfying because of the sheer pleasure of reading his sharp, beautiful and piercing books that have inexplicably not yet been discovered outside Bangladesh -- neither in Bengali-reading West Bengal in India (is this because of copyright reasons?) nor in the non-Bengali-reading world because of the absence of any translations, especially into English.

And why will reading every Humayun Ahmed book depress me? Because with him unable to write any more, I will soon be able to catch up with all that he's written and then have nothing new of his to read. Coincidence, you think?

Indrajit Hazra is a writer and journalist based in New Delhi. He is the author of *The Burnt Forehead of Max Saul*, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, and *The Bioscope Man*. His translation of Humayun Ahmed's story *Onhok* can be read on www.facebook.com/indi.hazra/posts/10151135608688694

SHORT FICTION

Unexpected Angel

FARAH GHUZNAVI

She barrelled her way through the crowd that had wrapped itself tightly around my shrinking figure, a miniature dynamo of flying blond curls and righteous indignation. "Leave her alone! What are you staring at?!" she barked, her sense of authority belied by her diminutive stature.

The other children withered before the onslaught of that fierce blue gaze, melting away with myste-

rious rapidity. The two of us were left facing each other in the sudden silence.

I buckled under the weight of the curious stares from my classmates, and my prayers for rain during our mid-morning break went unanswered. Much too soon, it was time to go out and play. But with whom, I wondered, as my panicked breathing tattooed an unsteady rhythm inside my chest.

A sympathetic look accompanied the pressure of the teacher's palm against my rigid back, but she made it clear I could not linger indoors during playtime. And within a few minutes of my eviction from classroom to playground, I was surrounded by children whose badger-

ing questions I could neither understand nor answer.

Until Belinda appeared, I'd been drowning, sinking bit by painful bit.

Now, she put out her small hand, taking mine in her confident grasp. The concept of rejection never crossed her five-year-old mind. I looked down at those pale fingers contrasting so boldly against my own coffee-shaded skin; and for the first time in forever, I felt safe.

And that was exactly how she kept me for the next nine months, before it was time to return to the new nation that was emerging from the bloodbath.

We were inseparable at school, everyone saw it. And if they didn't understand what had drawn the supremely confident English girl to the shy soon-to-be Bangladeshi, it didn't matter. That's just how it was.

Kindergartners are pack animals; wolves, when they smell blood. Luckily for me, everyone liked Belinda. So by extension, they tolerated me.

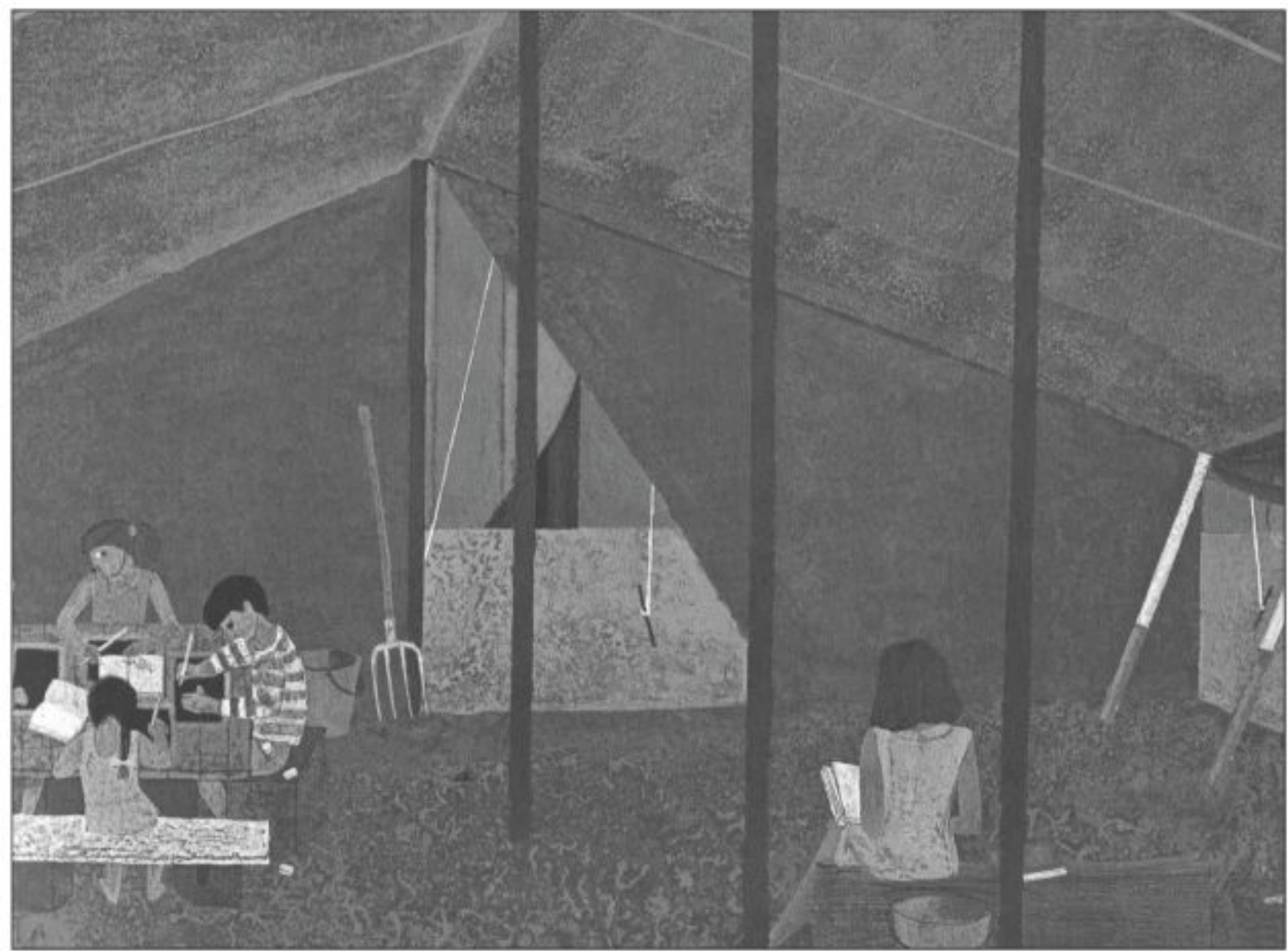
Periodically the teachers would separate us in the interests of "class discipline". Every now and then another girl made an abortive bid for the position of Belinda's best friend. And inevitably, we occasionally had a falling-out of our own.

But when things got complicated, Belinda and I had a well-tested formula to extricate ourselves from the situation. One of us would look at the other and say "What were we fighting about again? I can't remember..."

It provided an invaluable face-saving option for two little girls who both had more than their fair share of pride.

And it worked every time.

Farah Ghuznavi's writings have been published in anthologies at home and abroad. She is currently editing an anthology of new writings from Bangladesh for the Indian publisher Zubaan.



Holy Connections

SHAZIA OMAR

When sad-eyed Betty typed some key words into google search, the results were not what she expected. The first website suggested was on faith, of which she had none.

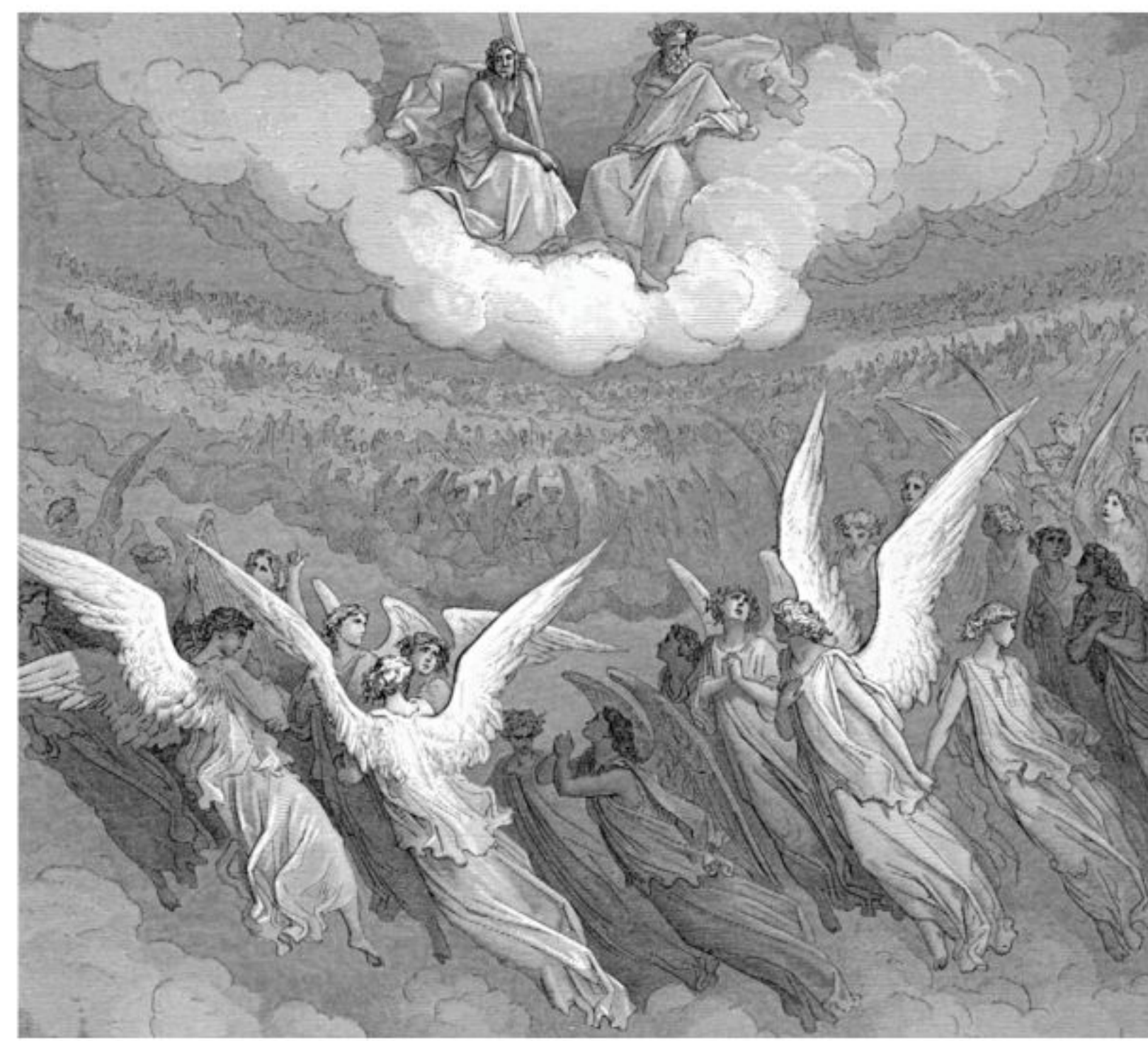
Nonetheless, she browsed through the site and came upon a prayer that brought a smile to her lips. She whispered it several times and found in herself the strength to cope with the miscarriage she had suffered earlier that week. For the first time since the accident, she pulled herself out of bed and made her way to the pub where she was a barmaid.

"God, we've done it!" said Michael, when God entered the room, this time in the form of a young man dressed in torn jeans and a t-shirt.

God gave him a patient smile. Michael was eternally trying to create channels that would allow human beings to communicate with Him, so they could "realize His magnificence" and "devote their lives to His worship". But God didn't really care about all that. "You don't give up, do you, my beloved?" he said. No matter how hard He tried, God couldn't convince His archangels that their efforts were unnecessary. He had created Earth to entertain Himself, a garden to stroll through and observe, out of curiosity, for amusement, not the need to be worshipped. It didn't matter to Him whether or not mankind knew the Truth and thanked Him.

"It's a masterpiece of science, Allah!" exclaimed Gabriel. "You'll love it!"

God nodded. Indeed He would love it. He loved everything Michael and Gabriel came up with. His darling angels toiled without rest to invent this and that, in the hope of enlightening humanity. First they came up with messiahs, then holy books, then television. All attempts to get a message across. Of course,



humans found every way to misinterpret their signs. Religious wars, oppressive political systems, meaningless reality shows. No doubt, Lucifer had a hand in their misunderstandings. God smiled inwardly. That Lucifer, he really knew how to lead people astray.

"It's called a search engine," added Michael. "It's an addition to the internet we invented a few years ago." Michael's wings fluttered in excitement as he explained the workings to God. His halo reflected the sun directly into God's eyes and made Him squint.

"We call it GOOGLE, Lord," explained Gabriel. His blissful, child-like face disguised the true genius of his being. He was God's most innovative creation. God thought for a moment perhaps He should endow a few others with that sort of creative capacity, and instantly, all around the world, hundreds of baby artists and scientists were born.

"Knowledge and wisdom will be at everyone's fingertips," said

Michael.

"The possibilities are endless," said Gabriel.

The two of them fell into an excited chatter about collaborative social spaces that could help people connect to their higher purpose. God noticed that they were absorbed in their own activities, so He slunk out of the room. The building where they had set up their workshop was a dingy four-storey in north London. Not far from it was a pub called Heaven's Gates.

God made his way to the pub. As he walked, flowers bloomed and birds chirped divine love songs. At the pub, He found a teary barmaid polishing her nails. "Are you ok?" God asked gently.

"What's it to you?" she replied and turned her back to him. Despite the music, God could hear her whispering something to herself. It sounded like a prayer.

Shazia Omar is a member of Writers Block. Her novel 'Like a Diamond in the Sky' was published by Zubaan, India.