

SHORT STORIES AND POEMS

Javed Amir

The Mask



THE *MASK*

TEAM

501

JAVED AMIR

THE MASK

Selection of Short Stories and Poems

The hidden voices toss
Meaninglessly
My greatest thoughts remain unsaid
Unheard



MAKTABA JADEED
LAHORE

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FOREWORD

Often the publication of a literary work, perhaps by way of compensation for what T. S. Eliot calls the pain of turning blood into ink, evokes in the author's mind visions of immortality. In bringing out this maiden venture of a selection of short stories and poems, I have no such grand illusions. At best, perhaps, a two-fold desire : to provide a perspective to my journey of encounters with literature and, in retrospect, discern a pattern of growth, if any ; and, to help chalk out my future course.

Objectively, the booklet in hand contains, mostly, what could best be described as a writer's juvenilia, at the point of his first maturity. Though the poems belong comparatively to

later years, most of the short stories, barring a few like 'The Addict' and 'The Mask', were written nearly ten, in some cases five, years ago. However, I can note with satisfaction the distance I have travelled from the fairy-tale short story of 'Bari Haveli' with its penchant for melodrama to 'The Addict,' where I began to lisp at the rewarding use of symbols.

Apart from exploring patterns in my development, the second consideration in my selection has been the bringing out of a book with food for every palate. I have, therefore, included character short stories, stories where theme or plot predominates, atmosphere short stories and experiments in the new vogue of 'impressionistic' short stories. The use of the term impressionistic, however, has no relevance to the efforts of the 19th century French painters, like Monet, who interpreted the beauty of light by means of colour. To me, this term—as I wish to experiment in the field of short story writing and, perhaps, a tentative beginning has been made, among others, in 'The Mask'—stands for the technique of centring on the mental life of the protagonist rather than on the

reality around him. In fact, the narrative interest is markedly subordinate to the lyrical or philosophical or symbolical intentions of the writer. In insulating the character from his immediate environment and confronting him, incidentally, with total self-revelation ; in the inability to solve the fundamental problem of how to live life and, thereby, to fail to communicate with the reader, so that he has to understand the meaninglessness of it all, either indirectly or through his own experience, the impressionistic short story breaks through the Aristotlean definition of a beginning, a middle and an end. Instead, it achieves the condition of a lyric. The impressionistic short story may thus become a peculiarly romantic way of knowing experience in a sick age which 'can connect nothing with nothing'.

Finally, I must express my gratitude to Tabinda Husain for making the cover design. I am also grateful to Mr. Shabar Husain for his invaluable assistance in making this venture worthwhile.

Lahore :

S. J. A.

November, 1969.

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SHORT STORIES

SHORT STORIES

THE ADDICT

(1)

HE woke up from his deep slumber. It was evening. As the old Chaudhri opened his eyes on his tattered, sinful bed, he felt the growing terrors settling on his waking life. The vacant *Haveli* was staring horridly at him. He seemed to have lived for a hundred years in that one evening nap.

“Shamsu ! where are you ?”

The only servant was preparing the *hooka* for the old man.

“Here I am Chaudhri jee.”

“Where is Walayat, Shamsu ?”

“He has work to do. Already the *Haveli* needs repairs.”

“What time is it, Shamsu ?”

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"The sun has set. I have lit the lamps at the main door."

"And what day is it, Shamsu?"

"Don't you know, Chaudhri jee it is doomsday, I mean Friday."

"But why haven't you brought my bowl of water?"

He was beginning to feel the diminishing hues of his grains of opium. He must always be intoxicated to overcome this horrible guilt. But the servant growled :

"You must not take it again, Chaudhri jee. It is bad for your health. And then your son—"

He knew it was not his fault; for whenever he asked the time, the *Haveli* answered, 'It is time for opium.'

"I wonder what has kept him so late in the hospital?"

He opened a packet full of Circean charms, cut into small round drops, into his wide mouth and, pouring water after it, swallowed the black mass in one big gulp.

"Go and call him, Shamsu. It is getting too late."

He was feeling elated. But, of late he had grown weak. Now the charms and sunless abysses of his dreams were boring him. Drop by drop the charms of life were dying out. Life was oozing away. And then, this summer heat that blew into the village made existence unbearable. It was as if for centuries

THE ADDICT

he had lain on his deceitful bed facing this cruel, hot storm with its dusty whirlwinds as they swept into the courtyard and against the decaying *Haveli*. Now as Shamsu banged the main door after him a shadow of urgency crept into the place. He was feeling wearier than ever before.

He shouldn't have taken a larger dose, he felt. It would surely upset his stomach. And then his son, Walayat, would have to resort to all kinds of nasty medicines and injections. And injections he detested. But, then, he loved his son, who was a doctor and who had left the city and come to live with him in the ancestral *Haveli* only to look after his beloved father. All of a sudden he blurted :

“I wonder what is keeping him so late in the hospital. I don't like this frivolous habit of staying out of doors so late. And he knows he has a sick father to attend to...”

He was his last passion in life. He was going to redeem the whole lecherous family. So the old man was always fussy about his prized possession. He knew that the gaping walls of the ominous ruins around him needed repair, which his son would provide. And he felt regenerated and afraid at the same time. He was wondering why Walayat had refused Jameela's father that day ? Was he interested in somebody else ? The old man recovered himself and chuckled understandingly :

“He told me he will remain a bachelor all his life. Throughout his years he has tried to be different from his progenitors.”

The Chaudhri's own grandfather, the one-time

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renowned Jagirdar, had spent no less than a fortune on his son's marriage. He had sold half his lands to get the money. They had to bring all that money on a cart—sacks full of silver coins—as well as hire a gunman. and one day, the Chaudhri thought, he would arrange Walayat's wedding in the same grand manner.

“But why hasn't he come home yet ?”

And he stopped dreaming.

(II)

The sun rose above his ugly bed. Now the dust was getting warmer. It was beginning to suffocate him. He turned the pillow sideways, clinging to the cooler part with his mouth wide open. The Ramadan of his abstinence was over. He felt the dust revealing millions of painful memories.

“Shamsu, what is the time ?”

“Your son does not want to come to the *Haveli*.”

“Bring me the bowl of water.”

“I can't. He is asleep in the hospital.”

At this the old man clasped the blanket in pain. In the ominous silence, the old Chaudhri felt as if the *Haveli* was grinning at him with its sombre face.

“Shamsu, he promised his mother he wouldn't do it again.”

“But why did he sleep in the hospital, Chaudhri jee ?”

THE ADDICT

If he had stayed in the city he could have earned a lot more and far more quickly. He should have lived away from the *Haveli*, this callous, inhuman enemy of his forefathers. He knew this. Then why did he choose to be a deliberate victim. He could have escaped heredity. He was different. He was not like him at all. Then why had he slept all night in the hospital? The patients could have turned him mad. And then morphine !... He knew Walayat shouldn't have been born. And throughout his years he thought he was going to be different ! And yet he will be similar to that filth, that horrible infection in his blood.

“Yes, Shamsu, let him sleep. We must not repair the ruins of this heartless coquette. We shall have no more marriages. We must let these walls crumble to dust.”

Now the burden of life drifted away. He saw it all. He was the wound and the blade ; he was the victim and the executioner. But he was feeling relieved. He had nothing to hope for. As usual in this *Haveli*, life had given birth to death. And he saw it all as clearly and vividly as an early morning dream.

“Shamsu, give me that bowl,” he said loudly. Grabbing it from the servant, he flung the clay utensil far into the courtyard. It hit one of the parched walls, splashing some water on the dust, and landed on the floor. Uncanny as it seemed, the bowl did not break.

ELECTRA

A LIGHT drizzle filled the grey evening. He hurried on the road with the drops of rain playing softly against the thick canvas of his raincoat. After her burial he had been to Smith's Shop to drown the poverty of his vacant mood. 'A strange experience, rather funny,' he thought. It had really moved him, though. And now he felt the road beneath his feet harder than ever. Near Bank Square a huge bus startled him and, as it passed, the sidelight glared at him with a strange vividness.

The rain pattered thicker. He turned and got beneath the shed of a bus stop. Inside there was an old reminiscent blackness, smelling faintly of bygone days. He felt a strange emotion within him; it was either the pain of pleasure or the pleasure of pain—he did not know which. Only the dry-wet road, smitten with drops of rain, flickered before his eyes in queer designs, somewhat blurred phantoms of life's dull agonies. Occasionally a car husked past, splashing the water furiously, destroying the deep images of the Mall. Tortured and restless he stood there watching bubbles of water sprout in millions of diffused memories.

ELECTRA

Death. Pain. Desolation. Have you ever laughed at death? Well he had. How eerie ! How awful ! The horrible echo of the graveyard shook the caverns of his memory : A withered pale face. Watching life. Life that had grown cold for him. A dull, passive, listless drama woven in a ragbag of dirty, filthy incidents. He felt dumb. He could not reconcile himself to his past. He could not remember anything. Only, the road beneath his feet was harder than ever.

‘What ! Am I dead ?’ he whispered.

More dead than alive ? A living dead ? Or perhaps he had gone mad ?

‘I am not mad !’

Yes...he was one of those living dead...Anything but not...not mad.

He could have helped her on in her life. A breathtakingly lovely woman. The music had throbbed in his mind. One of those absurd modern romances that begin from bus-stops and then carry themselves through jam-packed rattling buses and roaring traffic. What else did he remember ?

‘Where is she buried ?’

That reckless and deliberate gaiety. Followed her. Fell head over heels in love.

‘Where is her grave ?’

She must be happy in Heaven, if there is one. The

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undiscovered country. Didn't make the best of this world. Damn it ! Once you are dead...The flower that has blown forever dies. Agnosticism ? The Day of Judgment ! Damn it all !

'Where is she ?'

Somewhere a dog barked. Rain. Had to shoot 'Dollar'. Bit father on the hand. Could have caused rabies. Shot him in the head. Father worried about injections. The rain beating against the dark road. Louder. A stormy night. The whirring noise of an approaching bus. The pattering sound dissolved. A shrill ! Footsteps of men. A rush and disturbance of images. Rain.

He could have helped her on in life.

'A sad case,' the doctor said.

What else did he remember ?

Funerals. Each second that passed. Funerals in the world. Coffins, graves, funerals in the world. He had loved her. Solitary in his pleasure, he stole to her house in the night. Huge building. Dusty roadside. She lived alone with her step-father. Her room, when she had switched off her light. Brush and palette and the poems of his dreams. Images receding, blurring and then fading. A dim murmur of distant thunderclaps. A few drops on the road. No noise of rain. The images flit before his eyes and fade.

Two old men :

'The weather is changing.'

ELECTRA

‘Uncertain and cruel.’ He hurled a mute curse at the sky.

‘It is bitter cold for the month of...’

He was shivering. Sickness in the heart. The light from a nearby lamp-post cast a brilliant reflection in the water. That whirring noise again. The images furiously disturbed. Footsteps. More footsteps. Steadily the reflections cleared. Dark nooks of memory. He remembered everything !

The dinner was to go until twelve that night. The marriage was being celebrated with eclat. Despite the sparkling gaiety a sombre mood prevailed. Oddly enough, Aslam exhibited odd manners of repressed anxiety. The way he talked to young girls, tapping them on their backs and drawing himself perilously near to them, made him look rather frivolous. She watched him with a strange terror in her eyes, then quietly slipped to her room with an excuse. Aslam explained confidentially to him that she suffered from some periodical fits. She had loved Jallal, who had betrayed her. Vaguely he felt something wrong somewhere. As for Aslam, he was already amusing himself in his alarmingly vulgar fashion. Turning to the crowd, he was saying :

“They sleep in separate beds tonight. You know she has a headache ! Don’t worry, boy, you’ll have the fun...” He had had too many pegs of Champagne. Or so it seemed.

Late that night, when he was seeing off the guests, his wife locked up in her room and Aslam drunk asleep, he felt fear as the last parting guest went striding off into the night.

Early next morning the maid-servant came clattering into his room screaming. He woke with a start. Aslam had been murdered. His head had been clipped off by a razor. The corridor was full of blood, a puddle of crimson blood with streaks flowing down the stairs. She was found unconscious in her room. Her lips were red with blots of blood. They carried her to the hospital. In her eyes he saw a ferocious pain—death like pain. Anger and blood. The doctors said she would not live. Her intestines had been all cut with the poison that she had drunk.

‘A sad case,’ the doctor remarked.

The police had arrived at the hospital. The murder, it was obvious, had taken place after two in the night. Or so the remarks of the maid-servant suggested. Just then the House Surgeon handed a letter to him. The Inspector took it from him. It had been found in the pocket of her coat. He tore it open. Stared at it for a moment. Then hurriedly read it aloud :

“How tortuous and unbearable. This is life. This is growing up; a series of petty, futile disasters have passed across my way and now, nothing is left, not anything even tragic. I have put away sorrow like a dirty piece of shoe that is worn out. What remains ? Life’s dull agonies : A monotony of dirty despair and diseased persecution. All round me is futility, very much like the ashes left in an empty grate. ‘Life piled on life were all too little’...I dream, again I dream of those two lovers who slept so sweetly with each other in the garden. I know it is pitiful to talk in beautiful words before death. But surely all of us have to end in

ELECTRA

a grave...! I will take my revenge from that monster... But why do I pen these words? I do not know. All is accident, confusion... My mother was a whore, I was a bastard child. Eh, to understand all is to forgive all? When my mother died I was fifteen. I was in college, then. How I remember those days. Jallal, my first love; First prize in painting. Pooh! Good old days. But life had something else in store. Aslam was a debauch. That cursed night. Just one agonised scene of my life and I was frozen into a woman before my eyes. Bastard! Swine! I'll kill him tonight. How desperately he tried to marry me off. But, how could I forget that I had an abortion...The way he behaved with those young girls in the Hall under the impression that I had been disposed of. I'll drink his hot blood tonight. I never loved him. I would have killed him a long time ago, I would have killed him yesterday but for that silly goat of a man who saved him from my clutches..."

What happened yesterday? White tortuous watery void.

'Where is she buried? Where is her grave? Where is she?' The storm had passed. There was no more rain to fall. In the distant skies one could hear the regular rumble of clouds. Occasional flashes of lightning made visible the tall buildings that stretched into the sky.

'What else did he remember?'

That silly goat of a man. Love, he whispered in a ghastly grin as if he were grimly amused. The clear blue sky. The moon shining in the biting air. He thought he saw two lovers who had slept so sweetly

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with each other in the garden... The cold air. The frozen sweat on his brow. Wasn't he supposed to be drunk? The door of the Operation Theatre had opened slowly. Two '*jamadars*' dragged the trolley with the stretcher to the mortuary. The creaking noise from the wheels. Pain.

Death. Pain. Desolation. Have you ever laughed at death. Well he had.....What else did he remember?

A car stopped near the age-old footpath. A thick voice filled the air : 'Lift please.' Silence. The car sped into the night. Way down across the wide road, he felt, he could still hear the muffled echo from the graveyard :

'Ha ! Ha ! Ha !'

YOUTH

“What shall we do tomorrow ?

What shall we ever do ?” [T.S. Eliot]

HE returned home for the vacations. The sudden break from the monotony of University life brought a juvenile freshness to him—a somewhat wistful, romantic agony. It was an altogether new feeling. Before that, life had been none too pleasing. How he longed for a change from the tedium. No wonder he had grown restless, lately. And now, as he watched the summer clouds sailing in the warm breeze, he felt elated. Even as he breathed the sweet-stale air he felt young. This August he would be twenty. The music stirred in his mind, variously nostalgic, muted, silently youthful. He felt lonely.

Home at last with his old friends—they who knew him from childhood. Those lusty voices he never forgot ! “You haven’t changed old boy, not the least.” chuckled Aslam. “How do you know ?” he asked. “How do I know Ah !...you see Mr. Shahid, we know you more than you know yourself !” And Ejaz added : “Why, man, you are still without

girl friends, I suppose." "Of course not !" and he lied. Life is all lies. If you tell the truth you are a fool. "Alas !" sighed Ejaz in desperate condemnation, "none of us is pure." Yusuf had no audience : "What about the party you promised us, Shahid ? Man, you have to stick us tonight..."

Those neglected children, who never went beyond matric, had now thrown themselves into the dungeon of office-life. Now they had got used to it : no work, excess of tea, filthy language, dirty pubs and, of course, prostitution. Our hero pitied them. He explained :

"Man is weak...very weak. We are the hollow men. You go after evil desires; let me tell you that none of us actually needs a girl. Most of our longing is exhibitionism." He continued after a short pause : "I know all of us are tempted to behave in that manner. But in reality one does not need a girl. I do not need one at all." Once again he was lying. He knew it. He felt a strange want.

(II)

When his friends were gone he mused : 'Evil communications corrupt good manners.' Two years back they were less involved in lechery. Now they were sex-maniacs. But who isn't ? He shrugged his shoulders. At college, he had been an omnivorous reader. He had buried himself in books, sublimating, so to say, his base desires. He had a smart habit of proclaiming himself an atheist. But let's not digress. Whenever he saw some beautiful girl he felt an intense desire to kiss her or, shall we say, to press her bare arm. But he knew that it was a pose. He didn't actually need a girl. At worst, ran one of his maxims,

YOUTH

one needs love and not flesh or sex or what have you ? Besides, he was always acutely short of time. Perhaps he hated courting. And then he was aware of the politics and intrigue that always found their way into modern amorous encounters. Gone were the days... "Fool !" he sighed. But why had he watched from his window those pretty looking schoolgirls sweep in rows on the road below him ? He had always liked to look at them, all of them.....

With a touch of irritation, our hero shook off the sentimental mood and stepped out of the house into the open air. As usual, a gentle breeze was blowing. And he was twenty.

(III)

At the night club, a sumptuous dinner had been ordered, which was being duly swallowed. Before that all had, except him, a roaring toast of whisky. Someone said : "It is believed that wine is to be freely distributed in Heaven. Isn't it foolish to wait for God's Heaven when this world can be transformed into Heaven ?" Amidst laughter another interposed : "Wine and women sayeth the Lord...will make you healthy. The consensus of opinion agrees with you, sir, that man is weak, very weak as you say. Now when you admit that he is weak, how do you expect him to refrain from his greatest weakness ? You know what I mean ?" And Ejaz grew emotional : "Remember, Shahid,...all our philosophies are rotten. Without woman no philosophy is complete. Without her life is barren. I tell you I want woman all the time. I tell you, I tell you...you cannot sleep without them. O Cleopatra : Age cannot wither...She makes hungry where most she satisfies !"

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With that he landed on the floor, already half asleep.

He sat silent. He was staring at the bottle in front of him and the empty peg nearby. He had come back to the bar. Aslam was pouring another peg for him. Solitary in his oblivion, he was watching the distant darkness, aching with a sensuous pleasure as he heard the deep breathing soul in him. For a moment he was lost in a supernaturally brilliant and distinct, yet remote and strangely irrelevant, world. He had ceased to be himself, his old rotten self...

(IV)

She sat before him, a girl not thoroughly beautiful but fairly attractive. She had a pink face, almost painted, with large, black eyes. The silence seethed and bubbled around him. She seemed drunk. He sat inert. He did not love her, then why was he here? Did she really want him to treat her like an animal in her own house? But he began to caress her! All the college girls swarmed into his self. The bus-stops, the sideways, all of them that he had longed to kiss or else... How he longed to touch those breasts. The gesture was magical, it transported him into the present. He felt the moment become eternal. There was no past, no future. Only the present existed, a present beyond right and wrong.

She threw her arms around his neck. He felt the agitation of her big ripened breasts. He noticed the caressing tone of her lips, bluish and livid. He heard her pulsating breath. The skin was perfumed. He almost saw the warm blood beneath her snowy flesh. He kissed her..... But when all was over he felt disgusted at the meaningless hideousness of youth.

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I HAVE not written for a long time now. After that night, I had made up my mind never to write again. But you know we are all apt to break pledges. And then, I have changed in this long, dreary period. Now I enjoy with holding the so-called moments of inspiration. I have ceased to feel. One thing, I am no longer disgusted. Yes, I am not fed up with life any more. Only, I have grown to be something different, different from all that has been. The absurd, romantic longing to inquire into the mystery of my heart, beating so wild, so deep within me, has faded into the quagmire of a new barren emotion almost cruel. Now I hate myself. Around me lingers the shadow of my mask. Perhaps, this is too inadequate an emotion for modern times? No, you don't think so. This hobble of being alive is not so serious after all! What if you suffer and you are alone : *magna civitas, magna solitudo.*

My glance darted into the night. The headlights rotate on the brown, dusty gravel of the nightclub and illumine white poppies at the far end of the lawn. I feel the cold smoothness of the steering clenched

within my grasp like the icy numbness of frozen flesh. The car whimpers and groans as it comes to a halt. I glue my eyes to a signboard. Behind, the newly-trimmed lawn shines hauntingly! Why is everything appearing so strange to me? Like old days when...No, I am no longer in love with life. I have grown impersonal. But why this feigned objectivity? This dread of exploring into the meaning of meaning? I know I am not extraordinary. I don't want to feel extraordinary in any way. Yet I have no peace, but...let me warn you not to be misled by my words. I am not what I am.

As I come out of the car, they all join me, and we enter the ball-room. Tonight, I don't want to feel like a stranger in their midst even if they appear to be the habitual diseased animals. I listen to their filthy, mundane gossip with remarkable ease. He was saying something about the new cabaret dancer in the club. Greedily, I look around and transfix her with my hungry gaze. There she sits with a certain air of non-accessibility with large beautiful eyes, draped with long silken lashes. I feel I must have her. Suddenly, I remember. Just after the rain. She too thought that she was inaccessible! ...the night when we two were together—with the volleying rain and the tossing breeze. On the wet platform we walked a long way. But I was alone all the time! You know what people say? The past is dead. I don't believe them—but lost memories will always haunt you..... No! No! not again.

You cannot afford to be sentimental in this world. What you have to be is cruel. Life nowadays is jaded with a sick hurry and we are all victims of our divided selves. By now, you must have known that I

THE MASK

abhor what I actually love and reject what I definitely believe. The faint tortuous memory of the night on the wet platform returns to my mind. I wish it would not return. But there it is! The roof of the iron sheets had leaked heavily. The passengers huddled into dry corners. She did not know that I was there to receive her. Neither did he. I remember, then, when we two were together. Strangely enough, I felt as if I was alone. That she was not there. Non-existent. We walked a long way hand in hand. I was drenched with rain and so was she. But, he was there too! Almost dry. Not a drop on his body. Dry and cunning, but soaked with envy. He had cheated me. So handsome and godly in appearance, he was incapable of evil. I was betrayed by that which is false within. When the rain stopped, I was lost and saw nothing around me but the shadow of the mask.

But why should I tell you all this? I do not know! Sometimes, when the noise of the rain feverishly beating within me becomes unbearable, I ask who am I? What is it that I live for? Why have I worn this guilty veneer of ugliness wrapped in lust and deceit? Yet, though I ask these futile questions, I know that there is no escape from the enemy within. Yes, yes we are all self-destructive, there is no escape from one's self. The mask is within us all, the mysterious enemy ready to grab you and lure your soul into darkness.

Where is that justice that conveys our poisoned chalice to our own lips? No we do not have justice here! No peace! No love! No truth to pierce the mask of appearance! I know he has destroyed my conscience. I hate him for the harm he has done me,

THE MASK

and yet I love him. It is a strange attachment. I admire the unsensational brilliance of his petty trickeries, knowing full well that it is he who has inflicted this mask on me and transformed me into a dumb sufferer. Each evening, I imagine the volleying rain and the tossing breeze torture my soul. Yes ! Yes ! The past never dies. It returns. And lost memories always haunt you. I see the wound afresh. I have discovered its meaning, its pang : the poisoned chalice is always before me in the night. For the first time I am telling you the truth. You don't believe me ? I can see that. I don't care for what you believe. After that night I have never been the same again.

But why have I to tell you all this ? I should not come here every night. I must leave now. I hear them giggle. Yes, I must leave. But wait. What about this mask of ambiguity ? Yes I need more ambiguity ! I am no longer afraid of life ! Tonight I don't want to feel like a stranger in their midst. I will listen to their filthy gossip with remarkable ease... And then, I will have her.

DIRGE OF THE STONES

THE bus went whining up the curling road in second gear—groaning as it went. The massive frame shook desperately as it crawled on the sloping hill-side ! With remarkable efficiency the driver cut his way through blind turns and deep, narrow ridges. In the distance the thick black coating of the hills could clearly be discerned, looming against the dark patches of the monsoon clouds. “The wings of summer !” exclaimed Shahid. He sat apart from his three friends, solitary in his pleasure, reading a book of verses :

Beside our springs
Sit down, and in our mossy valley, on
Some bank beside a river clear, throw thy
Silk draperies off, and rush into the stream !

The bus was entering a gigantic cavern. It was a spectacular sight : The road winding, above and below and among the mountains. Closing his book, Shahid peered through the window down into the

yawning gulf of the mammoth, green valley. The abyss spread miles below him, deep down into far off brooks and rills that seemed to linger into oblivion. He was having a God's eye-view of it all : Tiny mud houses with flat, brown roofs spattered aimlessly among slanting green fields. The village green surrounded by pools, trees and giggling girls ! White, twirling smoke issued from the house-tops and spread in the forest nearby or, carried by the breeze of the valley, it was diffused into a series of blurred smoke clouds, trailing and winding their course in a circular monotone. Sweeping rows of Pine trees stood silent, as if frozen. He watched the ripe orchards raft in a thistly breeze. At the foot of the rocks, clear water was seen dripping rhythmically down the streams in an endless ripple. Life was so silent there. Yet he felt he heard some sad, strange noise rising from the valley. Perhaps the music throbbed in his mind, alone. He did not know. Nevertheless, his ears continued to be brimmed with that silent symphony, a bubbling muse muted with a repressed agony. Unable to comprehend the vague dirge, he concentrated on the trees that went plunging into the midst of bucolic life. And the bus went whining up the curling road ... groaning as it went.

On the back seat sat Salim, Aslam and Aftab. The 'bookworm' was busy reading Havelock Ellis's, "The Psychology Of Sex." The other two were having a wild quarrel over the supposed resemblance of the bus-driver to the famous Hollywood star Richard Burton.

A damp, cool breeze was emanating from the valley. The travellers felt healthier and gay. Shahid felt a weird effect envelop his senses. He could no

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longer hear the puzzling song, yet he had started to feel strangely melancholy and sad. The trees receding into the background seemed to him as mere symbols of eternity, dying, dying, dying. Turning to his book of verses, he read from T. S. Eliot :

—And the trees about me,
Let them be dry and leafless ; let the rocks
Groan with continual surges ; and behind me
Make all a desolation...

The picturesque Stanley Hotel was situated on the edge of a hillock. The terrace plunged into the valley like a huge, flat board. Their room was placed on the top flat. All round one could see mounds of rocks brimming with the shrill rasping of the cicadas. The birds were twittering and chirping all round. Looking above and below him, as far as his vision could trail, Shahid saw pine trees : tall, abaresque, silent and stately. Living in a city like Lahore one could never realise or reconcile oneself to such rough unevenness of the earth's surface. There the ground's only shape was flat, plain and smooth. But here in the ruggedness of the hill-side one realised what irregular proportions the earth could assume.

“What if the earth were different ?” he soliloquised grimly. “Life would still be the same, perhaps even worse. The catalogue of human always before our eyes.”

And he shut the window and strode downstairs.

He had fallen into his usual meditative trance.

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A faint breeze stirred. Shahid watched the sun setting behind the lofty peaks. Standing on the edge of the terrace, all the while exhaling the sweet-stale air of the valley, he watched weary labourers carry tins of water on the steep slopes towards the distant villas. In the golden stupor of sunlight, the long, slanting hills stood naked in their brooding sensuality. He was thinking. People came here like a host of Epicureans, hungry for pleasure. But, what pleasure? There one saw the naked brutality of life and nature. Even the perfumed wind, he felt, was laden with an unknown melody of despair. And he started to hum the words of Tagore :

—Often at the ruin of wasted hours my desolate evenings were filled with tears...

In the adjoining room someone was playing a violin. Salim had seated himself comfortably in one of the chairs in the lawn and meticulously resumed his perusal. Upstairs Aslam and Aftab were 'changing' for the outing, all the while matching wits. In the valley some labourers were felling a large tree. The sound of the axe irritating, muffled, yet piercing, echoed clearly in the distant hills. Each time the axe fell, Shahid blinked as if it were the noise of a gun. Then the tree fell with a crash ! And silence reigned again, more intense than ever.

Gradually the sun set and the sky was wrapped in a grey twilight. The sound of the violin had ceased to brim his ears. Salim had stopped reading and looked around with a Wordsworthian air. The silence had grown painful. Shahid heard the goats cough in the fields overhead. He watched, once again, those lofty hills where he had heard the hermit

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thrush sing in thorny bushes. Suddenly his hazy gaze struck some stones lying still on the hard earth, waiting silently, perhaps carried away by the music of the wind. For a moment he ceased to drink the perfumed aura of the blossoms. He felt his ears wriggle with pain, writhed with the agony of that desperate song that seethed and bubbled in the silence around him. It was the same strange music that he had heard in the bus. In a fit he drew his note-book from his pocket and scribbled some lines:

In the grey, evening air
By the frosty silence of the hill-side ;
I hear a mournful whisper :
'Tis the dirge of the stones.

At dinner only the two of them were present. As it happened, Akram and Aslam had not returned. After dinner they went for a walk on the Mall. The weather having suddenly grown cloudy, the place was semi-deserted. Stray groups of people moved about with hurried footsteps. In the shops, on the roadside, wafts of clouds sailed leisurely in the damp breeze. They went up to Gulmarg Point. In the opaque darkness of the night the trees seemed to droop and drowse into a melancholy slumber.

Shahid had not, so far, recovered from his mood of anguish. Salim, suffering from some sort of intellectual curiosity, tried to make fun of his deep and dour sentimentality :

"Hey philosopher ! You look pale. Is there anything wrong ?"

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“Nothing,” his face still wearing an expression of obsessed confusion.

“You know there is a strange feeling in me,” he began moodily, “to go beyond this humdrum of life, this absurd balefulness of the human drama, beyond books, beyond fear, compunction, hunger, beyond this paltry vision of life as a prison and asylum. What if the whole world were dark as it is now? I could see reality in the darkness!”

“Shahid,” shouted Salim alarmingly, “man, what’s wrong? I tell you this is definitely some kind of neurosis. It’s all due to repression...”

“Don’t tell me that,” he cut him short, “I know you are reading Havelock Ellis these days...”

They were walking downhill. The discussion had evaporated into the emptiness of complete silence. Aslam and Aftab, who had been busy with some ridiculous amorous encounter in a tailor’s shop, had, by now, joined them. Seeing the awfully serious look on their faces, he gulped :

“What’s wrong, Shahid ?”

“You won’t understand !” snapped Salim in a queer manner.

All three were silent for a moment, perplexed by the strange disease of their friend. Aslam and Aftab shrugged their shoulders. The four men walked on. A pause. They stared at him mystified. Shahid was saying :

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"Man worships the high, but lives in the low. Yet one cannot help noticing his sublime greatness. He is aware that he is not imperfect but incomplete, a meaning, an ideal not yet realised."

Salim groped nearer. He went on :

"Life is ordinary, so that in order to realise this ideal one has to deal with the exceptional. Literature, for instance, deals with the exceptional in life. But now I feel that all that delicious silence of books in days gone past holds no further charm for me. It's all very pointless and boring."

"I think," fumbled Aftab in a sympathetic gesture, "you'd better switch over to some nice detective by Agatha Christie for a change. Thrillers ! that's what you should try now."

He had to ignore him. He heard Salim remark :
"Shut up ! you enormous ass !"

Aslam who had fidgetted in the agony of discomfort spoke at last :

"You two 'sufees' are such crashing bores that one feels like pushing you off into that abyss. Men, you are wasting your time in idle talk. For heaven's sake be practical and try to live life !"

That night it rained heavily. The house was silent except for the constant pattering of the rain on the iron roof. It rained all night. One could exhale the domestic air even in this remote land. Yet the room stank of rotten fruit. Shahid listened to the

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endless monotony of the rain. Steadily it fell with a damp malignity dumbing the nerves with an awe that was impossible to tolerate. Around him his friends slept forgetfully, plunged deep into the warm drifts of sleep. He heard the howling wind shrieking desolately in the chimney and under the door, with a sound that was painfully enigmatic. And then there was that regular peal of thunder. He felt his blood racing under his skin, flushing furiously, without finding an outlet. Suddenly in the raging storm he heard the stones shriek in the wilderness : a bubbling muse muted with a repressed agony. It was the same, sad and silent whisper of despair that he had heard in the bus and then again on the terrace. From his drawer he picked up his note-book and read :

In the grey, evening air
By the frosty silence of the hill-side ;
I hear a mournful whisper !
'Tis the dirge of the stones.

GRAVE, WHERE IS THY VICTORY ?

(1)

PALE—green tamarisk trees stood flapping in the dusty whirlwind.

“O Lord, Thou art my God ; I will exalt Thee, I will praise Thy name ; for Thou hast done wonderful things...”

In the clear heat of the dusty brown morning Rev. Captain Priggs delivered the sermon in a rich virile voice :

“The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them ; and the desert shall blossom as the rose !”

A little farther from the graveyard, a group of German soldiers were marching into a dingy shed, their guns pivoted on broad shoulders. The army

priest looked at them in disgust. Nevertheless, the emotional lecture went on, from verse to verse of the Bible :

“The wicked flee when no man pursueth : but the righteous are bold as the lion !”

The enthralled listeners did not notice the soldiers. And how could they ? The oily voice descending from the dusty brown lips delved deep into their souls and wrung their hearts in sublime ecstasy. It appeared as if the arid waste around had already “blossomed into a rose.”

“In the midst of life we are in death !” roared the angelic clergyman as a group of mourners placed a coffin before the audience. Mr. Gall, the native Jewish artist, father-in-law of Mr. Holts, had passed away. The officer in order to please his wife had arranged this pageant. He himself, however, was nowhere to be seen. But Mrs. Holts attended the company.

The sermon was nearing its end. The stunned gathering heard intently :

“Death, where is thy sting ?”

“Grave, where is thy victory ?” hummed Rev. Priggs as the last words of his martial chant !

(II)

The burial was over. The tyrannous sun had risen on the solemn city of Murzuq. All round a huge canvas of buff coloured mud spread itself. The

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faint traces of dew on the vast tracts of the Sahara faded abruptly as breath into wind and dazzling sand floated in the bright sunshine.

As Priggs descended the stairs he glared at the distant shed now lying empty. He was well aware of Major Holts' cunning disposition. Being an honest person, he had openly objected to the latter's marriage to a Jew. This was followed by many a squabble. Lately there had been a move to transfer Priggs. And then a few nights back a native had attacked him on his return from the church.

The clergyman rightly suspected Holts' hand in the affair. And as if that were not enough, he had been ordered by the GHQ to bury a Jew. Priggs hurriedly walked on in the scorching heat. Near the Grand Hotel some natives were putting up the portrait of Hitler with shouts of "Heil Hitler"! The flag with the Swastika waved majestically in the hot breeze. The priest hastened his steps.

Capt Priggs' lodging was placed in the heart of Murzuq, a long distance from the clumsy army barracks. There he found Mr. Hammonds. The "dear friend" had walked all the way to chat with the priest. Says Mr. Hammonds: "So Rev. Priggs, you have buried a Jew?" He received no reply—and started laughing.

"Don't laugh," jeered the clergyman, "it pains me!"

"You know," he said after a pause, "I have decided what to do with this affair!"

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“What do you intend doing, my brave friend ?”

chuckled Hammonds.

“Tomorrow I report to SS office at the GHQ personally !”

“I hope you are aware of the consequences ?”

“I don’t care. I only know one thing : I am doing my duty !”

“Duty is a relative term, I think !”

“But not for me. I’ll see how they persist in their denial of the Fuehrer’s orders. They have not sanctioned my leave only for that fear. But, I tell you I have had enough of it ! This is sheer BLASPHEMY !”

“For heaven’s sake don’t shout, man !”

“Why not I am not going to suffer in this simmering state. Holts marries a Jew, forces me to bury a Jew, prevents my seeing my ill son in Berlin and above all attempts to take my life. And you say I shouldn’t shout !”

(III)

At ten that night Major Holts returned from the GHQ with clandestine designs. The long, awaited strategic retreat had at last been ordered. And, cunning prevailed.

Under strict orders the retreat was manoeuvred in

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the cover of night. The little ammunition that was in store was time-bombed ! The city of Murzuq slept forgetfully. Mr. Hammonds was strictly guarded by the Officer Commanding. Priggs slept soundly as his friends retreated in the dark.

(IV)

A drastic explosion awakened Priggs. Looking through the window by his bed-side he saw the barracks on fire. He was petrified ! Suddenly a buzzing sound became audible. "Bombers," he gasped ! In the streets people were running, a little madly. Priggs stood stunned ! His eyes swung round to the desert in front of him. In the dim twilight he discerned a massive black coating advancing from the north. The Allies' tanks were fast approaching !

The priest lit his lamp. All his papers were missing. Wearing his priestly robe he dashed into the street. There was a breathless hush everywhere. Priggs was betrayed into the enemies hands. As he rushed towards the church he saw the owner of the Grand Hotel pulling down the portrait of Hitler.

The church-gate was locked. With trembling hands Priggs opened the lock and entered. Behind him the door shut itself with a loud bang ! Locking it from within, he approached the altar. The church looked majestic, austere, bare, solemn. Its tall roof he could not gaze at ; but the walls round him appeared heroic and divine to him.

Priggs knelt. He was praying. Alone he prayed in deep sighs. Occasionally his melodious voice grew

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in a loud tempo. "Hammonds, why did you not wake me up?" The priest groaned silently; his whisper hung in the hall in its desolate muse. He was uttering the words of St. Paul *mortem suscepit contendo*, but his thoughts had carried him away to his ill son in Berlin. All round him was darkness and the horror of death...

(V)

A large crowd had gathered in the main square. The natives hailed the auspicious arrival of their new guests. Slogans were sung in honour of the new masters. Some of the squalid mob scribbled the swastika on dirty walls and spat on it. The German flag was burnt and trodden upon. All this was done by a frantic multitude in lieu of their miserable lives.

It so happened that the Murzuqans, notwithstanding the compatibility of a common religious belief between these two rival white races, pounced on the church. The gate being locked, they set the lovely old thing on fire.

The Allies' troops were entering Murzuq.

The house of God was burning. The righteous, who is bold as a lion, yelled. His ferocious squeals were pathetically drowned partly in the rumble of Allies' tanks and partly in the violent shout of the onlookers. In the green, holy 'bostan' the red leaping flames imbued it with a beauty hitherto never thought of. Their sunburnt skins glowed blissfully as they watched in macabre joy this spiritual blossoming. Smoke distilled itself in the early morning rays and the desert itself blossomed like a rose !

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(IV)

St. Paul's church had been originally built by a Christian missionary of the eighteenth century.

Though it had been burnt up a tottering wall still remained. But the Allies had plans to rebuild it.

A few weeks later British tractors were tugging away the large heaps of sand, when a soldier discerned a corpse. The face had been scarred. In the right hand there was a burnt photograph of a teenage boy and the left hand grasped the remaining pages of a 'glowing' Bible. His thick robe had not all been burnt up. And his tongue was stretched out rather comically on his dusty brown lips.

They could not recognise him. Presumably he was some sort of a priest. Well, that was what his dress indicated. That very morning before a group of humble people the British priest gave the following sermon :

"O Lord, Thou art my God ; I will exalt Thee, I will praise Thy name ; for Thou hast done wonderful things..."

In the clear heat of the morning the rich, virile voice went on :

"In the midst of life we are in death !"

Just then a coffin was placed before the audience. Unfortunately, there had been a controversy over this burial. Nevertheless, the emotional lecture went on ; from verse to verse of the Bible :

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“The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them ; and the desert shall blossom as the rose !”

A group of Allies soldiers stood hiding themselves in a dark shed across the road, a few yards farther from the oasis now converted into a graveyard. The army priest went on :

“Death, where is thy sting ? Grave, where is thy victory ?”

Nearby the pale-green tamarisk trees stood flapping in the dusty whirlwind.

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THE night lay swaddled in darkness, with thundering rain lashing out. Occasionally a streak of lightning flashed above the small 'kasba' and the huge Haveli projected out, prominently towering above the rest of the small houses in its sense of exalted supremacy. The rain continued to descend heavily, the rattling peals of thunder went on, as the small huts lay drenched with water. But, far away, on the roof of 'Bari Haveli', Radho, an old bewildered woman, stood firmly in a vain endeavour, madly facing the torrents of the heavy winter rain. Suddenly a shrill voice filled the silent atmosphere: 'Mohan... Mohan...Mohan...Ha Ha Ha Ha !' It echoed through the walls of the Haveli and was drowned in the thundering rain.

In the morning, as the mist cleared, the first beacon of light spread horror and joy among the inhabitants ! The huge Haveli had crumbled to pieces. A few stray walls stood like pillars of an ancient monument burning red amidst a glowing horizon. Full of fear, the poor villagers hastened towards the ruin. The vast grandeur of destruction

sunk in the edifice of a mass of scattered rubble, filled them with awe, and a mysterious anguish gripped their souls. The events of the last three decades had prepared them to witness this calamity. They knew who had done all this, but they could not speak ! Once again the clouds grew thicker and thicker and darkness grew all round. Suddenly, lightning flashed and a tottering wall fell with a loud thud ! Seeing this, the labourers scattered and fled to their homes.

(1)

Thirty years ago, it was a pleasant, gusty, evening of autumn. The scattered leaves had been swept by Raju as usual and consigned to the flames. The master's bed had been placed in the lawn and the 'qwalli' well on its way. A beautiful marquee wafted in the breeze, as the sun set behind the lofty trees. The feast today, though not an uncommon feature with 'Bari Haveli', had an additional fervour. Mohan, the young master, had arrived from the U.K. with a foreign degree in medicine.

Those fat and bulky lords sat chewing *pan* all night. Their sophisticated ears listened casually to the constant loud yells of the singers. The gaiety, however, was marred by the absence of Mohan. Strangely enough the 'Chhotey Sarkar' had disappeared suddenly, after his arrival, and was not seen till late at night !

Gradually the guests drifted away, leaving behind a group of snoring sleepers, one of them being 'Barey Sarkar' himself. Radho was terribly worried about her son. At last, two servants armed with 'lathis',

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were sent to look for him. Just then, Mohan reappeared. Apparently he was coming from Raju's hut. Quickly he was escorted into the Haveli to receive some renewed admiration. Radho wept to see her son back. Indeed, she behaved rather hysterically and kissed Mohan again and again. By this time the whole Haveli was roused and joy filled the brick-laden corridors. Everyone was happy. Mohan looked happy, though concealing an inner disgust. He watched the Haveli and the small 'kasba' as he ascended the stairs, heading towards his attic to rest. The night grew on and lulled the Haveli into a deep slumber. As Mohan slept unforgetfully, the Haveli grinned as it looked on.

Early next morning Mohan woke up with a start. Dashing towards his case, he withdrew a packet. In a short while he was pacing up and down his green orchard, that small corner of embellished charm full of wild flowers and thorny plants. A low whistle started to brim the fresh morrow and attract the chirping birds all round. In a moment a rustling was heard across the green hedge followed by a soft tapping, the fluffy thump of bare feet as they trod the leaf-strewn earth. The young landlord turned round and grasped the object of his love in a long embrace !

"Sheela, where were you last night ? I came straight to your home but could not find you. I stood there for two hours !"

Sheela kept quiet. Slowly she drifted under the big tree, her eyes full of tears. The gardener's daughter was a fairy's child. On very happy occasions she could not control herself. Then her heart ached and she burst into sobs. Mohan understood her deeply. He had loved her all through his childhood

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and now he wanted to marry her.

"Look what I have brought for you."

"A ring ! a diamond ring !" Her eyes flashed as she spoke those words.

"It is for our marriage, dear. Very soon....."

Just then Raju called aloud for Sheela and the lovers parted.

(II)

The autumn passed on. The young lovers met secretly in the boughs and hedges. No one saw them except the huge Haveli. Her darkened complexion scarred by the rigours of time had cast it into an emblem of majesty, from whence it looked on. Spring brought with it new odours, the fragrance of re-awakened earth. Mohan grew impatient and at last he spoke to his mother. Radho was shocked to hear her son speaking such imprudent words.

"You are a doctor, son, with a foreign degree. Do you really mean what you say ?"

"Mother, I don't want to enter into any discussion. Suffice it to say that I love her, and without her....."

"Shut up ! I am your mother and cannot bear to see my son marry a dirty, illiterate and vain slut."

"I don't care what you think of her. It is I who am to marry her and will marry her."

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There the argument ended.

That night Radho strode to the house of the gardener. Raju was perplexed to see his mistress while Sheela slipped out in a disillusioned joy.

"Raju, your services are terminated. I want your immediate departure tonight."

"Why, Bibi Ji, am I ordered this? Have I done anything wrong?"

"You needn't know," was the stern reply.

"Oh, forgive me, Bibi Ji. I have served you so long, and now..."

"I have not come here to listen to this idle talk. Here is a hundred rupee note. Take it, and you and your daughter quit tonight."

The old gardener kept quiet. His face darkened as he remembered the words of his dying wife. "Raju, beware of this Haveli. It is full of death." His eyes sank as they fixed their gaze on the broken hut, the green garden and the sombre Haveli.

"What are you thinking, Raju? What is your answer?" "I will do as you command," he said.

Sheela had heard every word. She could resist no longer. Her fiery nature sprang within her and she flung her pained pathos at the great lady.

"Bibi Ji, I shall not leave this house even if my father goes away!"

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“How dare you speak so defiantly, you dirty bitch? It is you who have turned my son mad. If you stay here you will kill him.”

“What have I done to him ? ” I say it again, “I will not leave this house.”

“Leave while you can, you dirty vamp. I know all your misdeeds. Look here, old man. I don’t want to see you and this cursed daughter of yours tomorrow in this house. Go, seek some new place, you damned slut, and charm young men by your cursed face.”

Raju yelled as he slapped his daughter.

“Bibi Ji, kindly leave us; I will do your bidding.”

(III)

The morning gleamed on the trees and the birds chirped to their flight. The cool breeze brought a new life in the humming world of spring. The weary Mohan woke up fresh, but his mind was clouded by a gripping heartache, the outcome of a haunted misery. The weak-hearted lover trod leisurely to that embellished garden where he had stored all his joys. The trees, the grass, the hedges and the flowers all awaited him there. It was a world of Mohan’s love—a world he was never to part with. This morning, however, Sheela was nowhere to be seen. Mohan waited for some time and then, caught by an uncanny fear, he hastened towards the hut. The gardener’s house was deserted. Suddenly a maddening force gripped Mohan and he flung himself into the broken hut. The dark cottage was lonely. Sheela was not there ! At once Mohan realised what had happened. Hurriedly he walked back to his mother.

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“Where is Sheela mother, where is Raju ? Where have you forced them out ?”

Radho was not the least perturbed, as she replied:

“I don’t know;” and then with a pause she continued, “Have they left ? What a pity ! I feel so worried without Raju... Oh, yes! it is Sheela’s marriage that is to take place in her village.”

Radho stopped, for she discerned a horrible expression in her son’s face. Suddenly Mohan yelled. His face was all pale, his eyes all red as he spoke these words of extreme anguish :

“I know who has done it. I know it, mother... I know it...MOTHER ! ” as he rushed out of the room.

Radho shouted, “Mohan, Mohan, Mohan.....” as he vanished. Just then, the huge Haveli trembled, but presently, it grinned and looked on.

The secrets of ‘Bari Haveli,’ which for years had been drowned in its majestic walls, spattered among the huts of the ‘kasba’. Mohan, who had lost the passion for life, was now lowering its honour. The hungry soul longed for such thrill and pleasure as lifted him from a life of emotional monotony and suffocation. Crippled and frustrated, Mohan wandered in the fields, looking into the houses with searching eyes, turning the corners of dirty streets, ever in search of Sheela. These frantic wanderings had such a bitterness in them that the naturalistic background appeared a demon to him, a wretched demon he desperately wanted to escape ! The villagers saw “Chhotay Sarkar” buy that pleasure from

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slavegirls which Radho had snatched away from him. And then they remembered the ghastly words of Sheela's mother.

“Beware of this Haveli.....It is replete with death.....”

In the beginning, Radho thought nothing of the approaching disaster. She was content to see Sheela away from her son. But, despite all her efforts, Mohan lived in solitude. His days were spent in the streets, his nights in his attic, drinking to drown himself into oblivion. Gradually an unknown fear sprang in the mind of Radho. One day as Mohan was away, as usual, she directed her feet to his deserted room. As she opened his shelf full of bottles, she saw some lines written on the wooden background. As she looked closer in the dim daylight, they read :

I walk on the soft green grass
With a sunken heart that swells ;
Anon those days will pass
Whose memory my mind doth shells !
Alone, alone I wander, for thou
Art, O love, no more with me ;
Fair breeze, shake not that woeful bough
Oh, it reminds me of the lovely she !

Beyond that point the poem had been rubbed off. The curious mother followed the faint verses. The last few lines could be clearly read :

Fear to my heart a horror brings
As I behold hollowness in all things ;

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The passing flux of time may grind
The memory of this mortal mind.
But oh ! night fills the skies above
And my thoughts sail to you, my love !

Radho read these words with anguish. A strange force overcame her and she felt a grave horror issuing from the very walls of the ominous Haveli. When she thought of her son, an unknown fear of a mysterious calamity enveloped her and she shrieked in pity and terror. For a while, she felt like Mohan and her heart longed desperately for Sheela. The inwardly weak mother finally succumbed to her son's ideal. The passion of a desperate lover had overcome the weak mind of a mother. At last Radho resolved to bring back Sheela.

Though Radho had been overcome, the Haveli had something else in store. Pure love could not prosper within its murky grasp. Those evil walls had stored in them the sighs of many an afflicted virgin. The 'illustrious predecessors' of the family had all played with this sacred pleasure of nature. They had bought love always. For centuries Bari Haveli had remained barren of pure love. Lately it had grown thirsty, and in its thirst for evil it had crushed the hopes of a passionate lover. It threw him into a wilderness and carried his footsteps where his progenitors had often been. Radho knew all this. But, as she hurried her footsteps downstairs with a new determination the Haveli grinned for the last time as it looked on !

(IV)

The spring lay in its final bloom. Mohan's heart was like the sea in its vitality dashing against the lonely

beach trying, in vain, for its fulfilment. Sheela had been lost forever. Radho's secret efforts to bring her back proved futile. No one could make out where Raju had taken his daughter. The mother wept in solitude to see her despairing son wasting away, but nothing could she do to retrieve her cruel deed. The 'Barey Sarkar' had long left his wife to pay alone for her misdoings! Mohan continued his wanderings. Little did he discern the sympathetic affection of his mother. Sometimes, when the mistress called aloud "Mohan, Mohan, Mohan.....come to me, my son!" the Haveli shuddered, for it knew the horror that would chill its walls for thirty years to come !

Night was approaching and the heavens grew dark. Mohan stood on the terrace in front of his attic with the moon shining on the perfume-laden flowers. Suddenly it appeared to him that he saw Sheela. He was not wrong. Love gives an extra eye. A lover's eye is seldom deceived in discerning his beloved. She was running on the road far away leading towards the garden. Mohan stood stunned. In a moment she disappeared among the groves and then a little later, as he stood gazing down, he felt a short quiver. Sheela stood beside him in the balcony. As he faced her, a shriek issued from his mouth. Sheela was bleeding ! Her face was cut, black and horrible.

"Sheela!" he gasped.

"Mohan, they are following me... Raju wants me to marry...Tonight is my marriage. I don't want to marry anyone. I told him. But...he...beat me and said...he...he would kill me. So I ran..." As she said these words she fainted.

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“Oh Sheela !” burst out Mohan.

The doctor in him, dormant for so many years, burst out again and he nursed his love. Within two hours Sheela had recovered her senses. But before they could speak, a heavy thud of footsteps was heard. Raju came sauntering into the four walls of the Bari Haveli. Then the footsteps came up the stairs. Mohan had locked the doors and windows by then. In a moment Raju and six men, with lathis, appeared on the terrace. At once they started banging on the door. Mohan and Sheela clung desperately to each other.

“Open the door, Sheela. I shall kill you !” cried the old man.

Hearing no reply, the men fell up on the door and broke it into pieces. Sheela clung nearer to Mohan in terror, her wide eyes beaming wildly in the darkness. The door being crushed, the men grabbed the horror-stricken girl, struck down the passionate Mohan, and after locking the second door descended, making a loud noise as they went. Meanwhile, however, Radho came to know what was happening. Determined as she was, Radho collected a band of loyal servants and before the men came downstairs, she stood before them !

“Raju, what are you doing ? Please listen to me. Kindly come back. I am very sorry for my harsh treatment.”

The old man kept quiet. Then suddenly he spoke !

“Bibi Ji, it is too late now. Let us be on the move, friends.”

THE MASK

“You shall not take Sheela away, I order you !”
Said Radho.

As no one listened to her, Radho signalled. At once her servants pounced on the men and a desperate fight began. The villagers, apart from being more robust, were properly armed. Their fiery nature soon vanquished their timid opponents.

The shouts from beneath awakened Mohan. He saw, through his attic window, Sheela tied with a rope, madly trying to undo the knot, being dragged mercilessly on the road. Every now and again Raju struck her with his lathi. Mohan grew frantic. The door downstairs being locked, he stood on the edge of the roof and yelled.

“Mother, don’t send her from here. Don’t send her, I say !”

There was no reply. Some groans were heard and then, as Sheela was being forced into the coach, she called aloud :

“Mohan, Mohan, my love, help me.....”

At once Mohan leaped from the roof and fell headlong on the floor with a cry of “SHEELA !” A stream of blood issued from his forehead and ended the spark of life in the madened lover. The cry was heard in the ‘kasba’. The game had ended, thought the villagers, as they ran towards the Haveli. Mohan had been killed by a tyrant mother !

And then the coach drew away.....and the voice “Mohan, Mohan, my love, help me !” vanished

BARI HAVELI

into the darkness, as the sound of the horses died into the terror of the night.....

The Haveli was weeping. The shock proved too much for Radho. She did not recognize her son and instead roamed about the Haveli, her eyes frozen with ghastly terror, a terror full of death. 'Barey Sarkar,' the romance-monger, knew little of what had happened. But the untimely death of his son, accompanied by the insanity of his beautiful wife, drove him from the Haveli into some other arena of joy. Radho was left alone in the big house, to shriek against those tyrant walls that had swallowed up her son. People heard her say.

"Mohan is coming tonight. He is to bring his wife with him. You know he is going to be the most qualified doctor in this country. He will not live in this old house. I will tell him to build a new one. Yes, he will do as I ask him. And then I will marry him to Sheela."

But as soon as the last word was uttered she would burst into a savage laughter and with that her speaking trance would be over. She would start weeping and cursing the Haveli, or roam about the big rooms calling for Mohan.

"Mohan, Mohan, Mohan, come to me. My son, come to me!" till she was exhausted and fell asleep somewhere!

Thus the years passed. The mad, frantic woman yelled on in her sorrowful agony. Her horrible screams echoed through the walls of 'Bari Haveli,' resounding her misery to the outside world. The people

THE MASK

around, living in the small huts, waited for the curse to end. Year after year, they waited. The lamentable story passed on for thirty long years. The loud screams echoing from the walls of 'Bari Haveli' frightened the huts of the 'kasba' and strange stories issued therefrom. Ghosts were mingled with the name of Radho. Some termed her a witch who had devoured her son. But Radho yelled on.

The cursed Haveli stood like a rock, all these thirty years! But lately it had grown black. The bricks had changed colour and corrosion had long set in. On dark nights when silence reigned and Radho lay exhausted after a day's frantic yelling, the Haveli wept. The curse that hid in Mohan's death - shriek of "SHEELA" scarred it into a huge lump of ruined ashes. And then it remembered the words of Sheela's mother."

"Beware of this Haveli. It is full of death."

It shuddered on its horrible destiny. For years it had brought misery to others and now it begged God for its destruction. Last night's rain proved too much for its desolate walls. It stood up mightily as the rain fell and then sank in its majestic glory, on the curse of love, ending at last the shrieks of a 'hated and murderess' mother.

Epilogue

The Haveli had now disappeared altogether. The villagers rejoiced, for the curse had been liberated. Children flocked around their old grandfathers to listen once again to the oft-repeated tale. The rain continued to fall. It rained and rained. The

BARI HAVELI

oldest villagers had never seen such a downpour before. Days, weeks, even months, passed by, but the storm did not abate. One by one, the huts crashed under the torrents. The miserable inhabitants feared lest the curse was not over, and over it was not ! One night, several weeks later, a loud thunder was heard. The trembling villagers discerned a ghostly sound in the thunder. In a short while the whole 'kasba' lay deserted. The huts that stood in that lonely corner of human habitation were all demolished by the constant pattering rain ! At last the thirsty sands of 'Bari Haveli' had slaked their thirst !

Once, where a small 'kasba' stood, now a blue lake flows enriching the countryside. The 'Bari Haveli' is no more to be seen. But people say that on spring nights when there is full moon, a shadow is seen lurking around the distant trees. Wherever that shadow appears a loud cry of "SHEELA" is followed by shrieks and yells resembling the voice of Radho perhaps roaming in search of her dead son, calling to him in the wilderness:

"Mohan, Mohan, Mohan.....come to me, Mohan. Where are you, my son? Come to me....come to me..."

and some of the most
valuable of the
country. The
land is very fertile
and the climate is
very healthy. The
people are very
kind and the
country is very
beautiful. The
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1871

Doerns

Silence

I

We are all dumb little creatures
Our existence a bleak, pantomime pageant :
Silence weighs on us
Nothing is spoken, nothing said
All remains unheard.

It is a dumb world.

In the gloomy labyrinth of my solitary self
The mind is lapped in opaque darkness
Stray shadows of thought loom
Blurred, inaudible.
There is a mysterious haze in my soul
Noises crawling endlessly
Rising and shattering
Against the numbness of a dull,
Mute destiny.

It is a cruel world.

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II

This is a frozen apartment
With barren shrieks mere noiseless whispers
Receding
Into a greyish, watery nothingness.
There is a painful langour in my ears
Like vast oceans
Breathing
Leaping
Simmering within me.
I hear the roar of silent sounds
Dumb
Agonising
Crushing noises.
Nothing, nothing do they mean to me.
It is a cruel world
It is dumb
It is
It is

*The hidden voices toss
Meaninglessly.
My greatest thoughts remain unsaid
Unheard.*

My Last Love

I sit here frozen like a carcass
Dying by degrees
Waiting for the final darkness.
And you thought we loved ?
Ah ! But now I know
What I should have known
The day I first met you.

Though they tempt me again :
The bluish glasses of your eyes
And those livid and parted lips-
Let me be a hermit and worship the sun rise
Or else, brood o'er and drink life's chagrins.
I cannot love you now
I know your sex, I know them all.

I was a fool when I took you to be different
Different from all that has been ;
I thought I had discovered myself !
But you have made life a cheat for me :
I can feel every dead thing now, a languid philistine
Clinging to common sensations
Glutted with all that always has been.

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I do not need you any longer
You can leave now
But wait ! why did I ever love you ?
Or even her ?they ?.....All ?
Yes, they were all alike ; always like you.
None was pure bliss, nor will it ever be
Will it ever be ?

Evening

I am alone in the room-
The house is brooding in darkness
For I have put out the lights.
The big iron gates of the garage
Strike vacantly against the cemented walls.
No one is home
They have all gone to the club.
The book on the table lies open
A short while ago
I read some pages
Of dusty facts worn-out through the ages
Now I can read no more !
My servant looks at me
Dismayed, worried.
The ash of cigarettes is before me
Always this same futile ash
When I am alone in the room.
I notice there is a storm in the lawn
Dusty storm that sweeps into the courtyard ;
I listen to what the wind says :
A howling tune that whispers in agony
And I rejoin in pain

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What music, what symphony
Can these dull chords of life attain ?
He switches on the lamp
Suddenly the dust outside looks
Warm and beautiful !
'Why have you put out the lights ?' he asks,
'Come out and sit in the lawn
It is so pleasant outside.'
The iron gates bang against the cemented walls !
Why am I feeling so sad ?
And I hear him add
'The bolt has been broken.'
'Shut up ! Leave me alone !'
Well.....
Why am I feeling so sad ?

The Dirty Dwellers

I see rotting slums, grey and cold
Where the hungry, the desolate suffer
Amidst the gaunt mud-houses old
Disgusted mothers, weary and withered
Squeal in anguish, and scold
Their sons bred in misery
Those grimy packs of human fold

An old beggar coughs hideously
The dogs prowl angrily
A widow expires in the foulest gut
Mocked by a few crumbs, starved to death

In the murky darkness of the street
There is no light
Blaring across the corners greet
Howls of pietistic virulence
The boors and rascals are praying
Hoping to cheat their God, without success-
All who pray are holy, they once were told.

Will they dwell for ever
In hunger, misery and shame ?

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Or, perchance, will their God deliver
Grace unto their damned souls' name ?

I quicken my steps...

But the Dirty Dwellers linger, hesitantly ;

The hound of life preys endlessly

On their treacherous destiny.

As I look back

I see them all rotting in slums, grey and cold.

The Black Wilderness

O gloomy heart dost thou hear
Someone drawing near in the darkness ?
Nay !
These haggard foot—steps that you hear
Lead into the Black Wilderness,
And dwindle far, far away !

In the thick nights face
Blend by a star-scatter'd grace
The cold flame flickers on murky castle walls-
Dimly, dreamily the light falls ;
Lost o'er yonder sand-toss'd heath,
Where the barren muse of fruitless breath
Is drunk with alien sighs,
Blurr'd footprints lie-
In desolate, endless, solitary sway ;
To weep, to sleep, to die away !

Blow ! blow the candle light
Hide ! hide the bowls of drunkenness
Let darkness be the only sight
In this void of nothingness !
Come wait no more...Hope no more...

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Fasten thine gaping sleepless door
With blackness.

—These haggard footsteps that you hear
Lead into the Black Wilderness,
They dwindle far, far away.....

N. B. THE IDEA BELONGS TO FAIZ'S
POEM : 'Tanhai' (Naqshe-Faryadi)

Religion and Eternity

“Time devours all”——Leonardo da Vinci.

Man is full of maniac dreams
But his soul beneath his self gleams
With love, with virtue, with heavenly showers !
While raging his steps on the torrent of time
He is led to Wilderness
The ignorance of Passion, the Reason sublime
All are bound by Darkness.

Here sits man to ponder, and beguile
His mind, on the unplumbed depths of his being
To see such light, which for a while
Satisfies his mortal anguish.
But oh ! how weak is man !
His quests beyond his mortal flight
How high the intellectual wings do span
Dwindle and stagger, lost in the burden and heat of the
day.

THE MASK

Thus, when Reason obliterates and Passion runs wild
The Apostles of God appear
They quench the thirst of those few who ponder and
beguile...

The rest are forced to follow
By the Great Hallucination !
Man, the dreamer of dreams
Looks upon his self and screams
His God may pardon his nature.

Then the Apostle dies-
Signalling the crack of doom
At once the sails of evil are hoisted
The earth is swept again
With misery, crime and hunger.
—Thus do all religions decay :
Their dreary psalms, toss'd unto the waves of life
Fade into oblivion.

Nothing is eternal : Religions are leases that expire ;
And, alas ! pious debris is the rack and ruin
Of all our sacred shrines.
Why O Lord is Man not his own Apostle ?
Why is he so weak to succumb
To the vicious chime of evil ?
Why is it that the force of Religion
Holds not his mind for ever ?

The Lonely Hut A Mile Away

The night grows dark on the mountain peaks-
Full of snow.
See how it glistens in the misty glow !
A sullen traveller slows down his steps
To rest a while ;
Torn by life's dull agonies he smiles
His hut a Mile away
Waits ;
In desolate hunger and cold it waits
The master so old and weary,
Perched far away
Beneath the rugged hills and growing darkness.
Ghosts of princes, prophets and queens-
Graced by death's immortality-
On the distant cliffs all dwell
Anon they sit and watch
The toiling, weary soul...Again, he sighs ;
In youth he sprang from cliff to cliff
With a ruddy vigour !...A laughter echoes in the hills :
They mock at his sighs ; they laugh at his groans.

A pause. The echo dies. The caves stare vacantly
As the sullen traveller walks again
To His Lonely Hut A Mile Away.

The Storm

The Heavens were as calm as a lonely heath
The waves of the sea rolled on, as if to breathe
The sultry atmosphere
Presently the horizon was enveloped in darkness
It spread on the yawning foam of the ocean
The pleasant breeze shook the silent atmosphere
It began to rain
Oh Lord ! such blissful scenes are
But an adoration of your Greatness :
The starry sky ; the silent night
The howling wind ; the fearful Storm
How the world lives and moves
Makes us believe that there is Something
Greater than we know.....!!

The Sailors Bound Home

The sea put on a darkish look
The sails were bound home
The scene appeared as a purling brook
No longer filled with foam !

The sun burnt like an ember red
The glowing horizon amidst the water blue
Made that island of green a lonely bed
For the boats destined home by the native crew !

Soon they will join the distant palm trees
Ere the sun goes down-
Their boats stumbled in the fretful breeze
As they lingered on the surges brown !

The white sails clasped the roaring gale
And drove the men to shore-
The sun leaned on the distant horizon now grown pale
Before it was seen no more !

Here do the sailors end their quest
And when life's journey is over
They sit along a lonely beach to rest
To feed the inner spirit that still doth hover !

Javed Amir

The Mask

This book contains food for every palate, including experiments in the new vogue of impressionistic short stories. In focussing on the mental life of the protagonist, in accidentally confronting him with total self-revelation and in the inability to communicate with the reader directly, the impressionistic short story breaks through the Aristotlean definition of Plot in terms of a beginning, middle and end. Instead, it tends to achieve the condition of a lyric!

"THE MASK is an impressive first book by a talented, young writer... What is remarkable about the short stories and poems is not only the degree of literary skill they exhibit, but also the quality of the imaginative experience they draw upon"

—The Pakistan Review

COVER DESIGN BY TABINDA HUSAIN

JAVED AMIR, still in his early twenties, has been the Editor of *The Pakistan Review* and Lecturer in English at the Govt. College, Lahore. This is his first book of poems and short stories. He has been, however, published in all leading English Literary Journals in the country. At present he is under training in the Pakistan Foreign Service.

