

ZAMIRUDDIN AHMAD

Sukhe Savan¹

SHE WOKE UP feeling embarrassed and sweaty. She quickly ran her fingers over her forehead, then her neck. Both were dry.

Through the door left ajar she looked out at the veranda shimmering with heat and light. She almost jumped out of bed, but realized it was Sunday. Languidly, then, she locked her hands and arched her arms, stretching them over her head. Then she extended one arm and unfastened the bedside window. A ferocious gust of hot air slapped her flush on the face. Outside in the alley, the sun lay stark naked. She was about to slam the window shut when the door of the house opposite hers opened. Out came the priest of the Juma Mosque, wearing a pair of *pajāmas* barely reaching down to his ankles, a *kurtā* and a skull cap, both of some coarse material. A thin, cotton towel, its two ends tucked firmly between his teeth, not only covered his head but also his temples and the nape of his neck. The priest started off toward the alley's corner.

He must be going to conduct the noon prayer—she thought as she closed the window.

Oh, no. She turned over to look at the clock ticking away on a side table by the headboard. What? Only eleven-thirty. Not very late. Still, I should be up and about now.

But she didn't get up. She stretched out on her back instead and started counting the beams in the ceiling, wondering why in this murderous heat she had decided to sleep inside the room and not out in the courtyard.

It was nearly two in the morning when I got back from the train station, that's why—she reasoned. If I'd slept in the open courtyard, the

¹Literally, “dry rainy seasons”; the rains, in the subcontinent, are associated with love, romance, and regeneration.

sun would have upset my sleep. Besides I didn't have to get up early today—did I?

Her eyes skidded off the sixth and last beam and travelled on down to her legs. Her loose *ġarāra*, crumpled and bunched up in sleep, revealed a flashing calf, shapely and wheatcolored, spotted here and there with the remnants of coarse black hair. She ran her hand over the stubble and then pulled the *ġarāra* leg a little ways further up. The thigh was perfectly smooth and hairless. She bared the other leg. Again a hirsute calf but a perfectly hairless thigh. With a quick, nervous movement she pulled the *ġarāra* back down to her ankles, just as she had quickly covered her head and breasts with her *dupaṭṭā* whenever she felt her father's presence.

Must shave!

She rolled over, belly down, and stretched her legs apart.

There was a knock at the front door. Bua will take care of it, she thought. There was another knock. That's when she remembered that the old maidservant had left for the day and wasn't expected back till late the next evening.

Hurriedly she got out of the bed, slipped on her *čappals*, and started off toward the front door. Midway she hesitated, turned around and went back over to the bed. She grabbed the *dupaṭṭā* from the headboard, threw it round her neck, and started back. She crossed the hot-as-hell veranda, and still hotter dirt courtyard, came to the door, peeped out through a rather wide crack and opened it.

Dulari, the sweeper woman walked in, a large round basket, with a stumpy broom handle jutting out of it, balanced on one of her ample, swaying hips. "Salam, Bibiji!" Dulari greeted her walking straight toward the latrine.

"Salam," she greeted back. Then she closed the door and went into the kitchen and put the kettle on.

"Dulari!" she called the sweeper woman from the kitchen.

"Yes, Bibiji!"

"Don't forget to wash with phenyl."

"I won't."

Dulari—what an apt name! the mistress of the house wondered. She really must have been a ravishing beauty in her prime. How fair her complexion still is. And what lovely eyes. She doesn't look like a sweeper woman at all. I wonder who told me that it was some nobleman—a Saiyid, to be precise—from Amanabad who had planted Dulari in her mother's womb. Oh, it was him all right, it was her husband who had told her. She smiled.

She recalled how she'd split her sides laughing when he told her that back in those days Dulari went by the nickname "Platform" (for everyone jumped on without paying), how every neighborhood brat who attained puberty tried her out first. No, I'd laughed because of something else: he'd tickled me so. And he'd tickled me so because I'd teased him: "So did you hop on the platform too?" Oh, how he loved to tickle me!

"Ram Dulari!"

"Yes, Bibiji."

"Care for some tea?" And before the sweeper woman could speak her mind, she poured out some tea into a clay mug.

Dulari came over and installed herself in front of the kitchen door. "Sure, why not?"

She picked up the mug by its rim between her thumb and index finger and gave it to Dulari, ever so careful not to let her hand come in contact with any part of the sweeper woman's body.

Dulari sat down, resting her back against the portion of the kitchen wall still in shade and started slurping the steaming brew noisily.

She stretched her leg and pushed the small, low stool with lacquered red and yellow legs towards the kitchen door and sat down on it. "Any news?" she asked, pinching away from her ample bosom the gauze-like muslin shirt which the sweat had glued to her body, and took a sip of the tea.

"Who do you mean?" Dulari asked as she put her mug down on the floor.

"Ram Bharosay, who else?"

"What news could there be after so many days?" There was a note of despondence in the sweeper woman's voice. But the next moment saw her despondence change into palpable anger. "The wretch, he must be hiding inside the slut he's run off with."

But even this failed to appease the sweeper woman. So she thought up an especially coarse invective to hurl at her runaway husband.

"No, don't!" the mistress cried, but to no avail—she was too late.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Dulari said. She downed the remaining liquid in one giant gulp and got up. "I must go now, Bibiji. I still have to do a few more houses."

Dulari went back to the latrine, picked up her basket, balanced it deftly on her left hip, and started walking toward the front door. Suddenly she stopped and asked, "Has Bitya left?"

"Yes."

"When will she visit next?"

“Who knows,” she said walking Dulari toward the door.

She closed the front door behind the sweeper woman and returned to her room.

She did her usual chores—dusting and cleaning—then took a bath and changed into fresh clothes. She went into the kitchen and from the basket hanging from the door frame took out two *parāṭhās* and three kabobs, saved the previous evening from the meal packed for her daughter and son-in-law for their train ride. She ate the meal and topped it off with two drinks of water from the fawn-colored stone-pitcher. Then she went up the stairs into the *barsātī*-portico.

It was sizzling hot inside the portico. Quickly she threw the windows—the one overlooking the back alley as well as the two facing the courtyard—wide open. The scorching wind, meeting with her sweat-soaked body, produced in it a sensation at once refreshingly cool and tickly. She began to hum, as her hands diligently and daintily returned the scattered objects to their familiar places. Finally she turned to the twin beds set in the middle of the portico. One had not been slept in at all, but the other looked a mess: the thin cotton rug that served as the mattress had become so bunched up that on one side it exposed part of the frame and cotton-tape mesh, and on the other side fell all the way down to the floor, dragging the bed sheet along. A thin, white sheet lay still folded at the foot of the bed; it hadn’t been used. The embroidered pillow of the crumpled bed was where it should have been, but that of the other, also embroidered, had surreptitiously moved to the middle of its crumpled mate. The irregularity made her uneasy; so she grabbed the offending pillow and thumped it down where it belonged. But then, the very next moment, she was patting it ever so gently, as elders affectionately stroke children’s heads. She arched her body over the messy bed for a closer look, felt satisfied, and began making it. Just then she noticed a rag way down under the bed. She reached in to pull it out with her foot, picked it up and examined it carefully. Oh!—she murmured, disposing of it in the small tin basket under the back window, in which two garlands of *bēlā* flowers lay quietly withering away. She closed the window and, still humming, made her way downstairs.

That day there followed a stream of visitors and callers. Bua was the first and least expected; for she had herself said she wouldn’t be back until Monday evening. The old lady removed her *čādar*, the wrap she wore when outdoors, dried her perspiring head and neck with it, lowered

herself onto the foot of the bed, and made an attempt to explain why she'd been back early: because she was worried sick that "after the departure of Bitya and her groom, my poor, little darling would be feeling miserably lonely, crushed by the dreary emptiness of the house."

And then Bua literally assaulted her with question after question. In answer she told the old lady that "the train was late, a full hour. . . . Yes, it was very crowded. Still, the couple managed to get into a compartment. . . . The rush should probably have eased a little after Kasganj, and they might even have found seats."

"Poor children. They must've been awake the whole night."

"Not really. They went upstairs into the portico right after dinner . . . to catch some sleep." A glimmer of a smile danced in her eyes.

Now she asked Bua some questions of her own. And she was told that Fujloo, Bua's son-in-law, moaned and groaned the whole night long; the fever just wouldn't subside. What could she do? It was serious. So she had to take him to the doctor the next morning. "He diagnosed typhoid and gave some red mixture . . . charged a whole rupee. Trouble never comes alone! . . . Yes, the temperature's come down a bit. . . . A good-for-nothing son-in-law. What a fine time he's chosen to fall ill, when Shubratán is hugely pregnant and about to deliver . . ."

She laughed. Bua is the limit. Does she really think Fujloo himself prayed to Allah to fall ill? . . . Bua really shouldn't worry about the medical expenses. I'll take care of them . . . "Employed or not, at least there's a man about the house."

It was then that Bua told her she'd run into the vegetable vendor on her way back and decided to buy some vegetables. And since Adda Mian's shop was still open, she thought she might buy a couple of pounds of meat as well. "Fujloo'll be bed-ridden for Allah knows how long, so I thought I should do the shopping, or else you'd have nothing to eat."

"You did the right thing," she said, taking out her purse from under the pillow. "How much?"

"What's the hurry," Bua said, getting up from the bed.

But she insisted. Bua did some quick counting on her fingers: "Seven-and-a-half annas for the greens and four-and-a-half annas for the meat—a total of eleven annas. No, twelve."

She took out a rupee note and gave it to Bua. Bua undid the knot in the corner of her *čādar*, removed a four-anna coin and gave it to her to settle their account. Then she picked up the *čādar* and made for her dingy little room at the opposite end of the courtyard.

Next came Bulaqi, the water-carrier's son, a red cloth tied around his

waist, supporting a skin stuffed full of water on one of his hips and part of his back. She asked him from behind the door of her room why Khairati, the boy's father, hadn't bothered to deliver the water himself.

"Father's thrown his back," the boy explained, on his way out to the mosque to fill another skin.

"Why veil yourself from him?" Bua said. "The boy's barely the age of our Bitya."

She disagreed. "Quite the contrary, looks like a fully grown man to me. Didn't you notice how tall and muscular he's become?"

The second time around the boy filled the bathroom tank and kitchen pitchers. Only after he'd left did Bua think she should have asked him for a third skin as well, to sprinkle on the scorched courtyard floor.

The mistress of the house was now standing in the courtyard freed from the oppressive sun, quietly cooling herself with a hand-held fan. "Looks like it's going to rain," she said, scanning the sky innocent of even a wisp of a cloud. Only now the leaves of the *pīpal* tree in Lala Jivan's compound no longer clapped wildly, and a scrap of paper lay listlessly for some time at the foot of the pitcher-stand in the niche under the stairs.

"So what are you cooking?" she asked, leaning against a courtyard pillar from where she could clearly see inside the kitchen.

Bua, who was diligently kneading dough in a flat clay bowl, answered, "Meat-and-potato curry."

"Do make some *čapātīs* for Shubratan and the kids as well. And yes, there are some kabobs left over from last evening, take those along too."

Bua gave her a look full of love and gratitude. "Shall I fix you some tea?" she asked.

"Yes," she said as she picked up the towel from the *taxt*—the low wooden settee—and made for the bathroom. "You put the kettle on. In the meantime I'll take a quick bath. It's so muggy."

When Puran, the flower vendor came along and sang out "*Bēlā* garlands!" she was still doing her hair. She stopped briefly and asked, "Bua, didn't you tell him?"

"I did."

"He must have forgotten then. Tell him again."

"All right, if you say so."

But Bua didn't tell Puran to stop delivering the garlands. Instead, she returned from the door with two strings of fragrant *mōtiyā* buds—pearly white and barely opened. "Here," she offered.

"Oh for heaven's sake. What will I do with them?"

Bua's aging eyes perhaps failed to notice the change her offer had

produced on her mistress' face. For if they had noticed, the old lady wouldn't have bothered to say, "Tie them round your hair-knot. They'll look nice."

She took the strings from Bua, who now returned to the kitchen, smelled their scent just once, and then nonchalantly threw them round the neck of the clay pitcher under the stairs.

When Suraiya came, she brought along a sweet, pungent smell that crowded and filled even the smallest space in the house. She put the basket filled with *ṭikāri* mangoes down on the *taxt* and explained that her father had brought the mangoes from "our Qaimganj orchard. He escorted me to the door. But he's already left. He's to see a lawyer. There's some urgent business."

In the meantime Bua, after closing the front door, returned. "It was Khan Sahib," she said. "He asked me to give you his greetings."

She intoned *vālaikum*—the greeting back—and made for the sitting room with Suraiya in tow. There, she started giving the girl her lessons. Today's lesson included a *ḡazal*. The girl listened attentively to her intricate explication of the different lines, but every now and then allowed her gaze to wander off to the older woman's face, fanning her own face once, then the teacher's, now with one hand, now with the other. When she came to the couplet

*There is no strength left for speech; and
even if there were,
With what hope could I really tell my
ardent wish*

she couldn't stand the girl's silently intent gaze upon her. "What's the matter? Why are you staring at me?"

Suraiya felt hugely embarrassed. The fan fell from her hand. She took the longest time picking it up. And then she said, rather timidly, "Miss, promise you won't be offended."

She felt speechless.

Then taking her silence for a yes, the girl mustered all her courage and in one fell swoop got out the words, "You really look very lovely today."

She blushed. Unable to decide quite what to say, she blurted out the first thing that came to her mind. "Stop. You shouldn't make fun of your elders."

"Say what you will, Miss. Scold me as much as you want. But, by

Allah, you do look very lovely today. Really. More than ever.”

“All right, all right,” she said, and resumed the lesson.

After the lesson both of them went out into the open courtyard. She instructed Bua to escort the girl back to her house. When Bua went into her room to fetch her *čādar*, for the moment leaving teacher and student alone, she abruptly hugged the girl, stroked her head, and said, “Thanks for the mangoes.”

The sun hadn’t gone down yet, but neither was it visible any more; only the top of the *pipal* in Lala Jivan’s compound still shimmered in the day’s last, amber light. The heat had relented, but it felt as oppressively close and humid as before. She pushed the *taxt* from the veranda into the open courtyard, sat down on it and let her feet dangle.

When Bua returned, she told her to get going before it got dark.

Bua, packing the food to take along, asked her if she would have her dinner now.

“No. I’m not hungry,” she said. “And listen, I won’t be back from school till three-thirty tomorrow; so don’t bother to come before then.” Then, as an afterthought, she added, “Take some mangoes for the children.”

“These are from Khan Sahib’s own orchard,” Bua said, picking four of them from the basket.

“I know.”

“He’s a very nice man.”

“That he is.”

“And so smashingly handsome.”

She made an inarticulate sound.

“His wife, too, was a very nice person. May God rest her soul in peace!”

“Yes.”

“He wants to marry again.”

“Oh,” she smiled. “And just how do you know that?”

“Just now when I walked Suraiya back to her house, I went in to greet Khan Sahib’s mother. She told me.”

“So fix him up with somebody. What are you waiting for?”

After a moment’s hesitation Bua let out the words, “For a certain somebody to just say ‘Yes’.”

The younger woman realized that her joke had back-fired; the thorn

intended for Bua had pricked her instead. She hurriedly got up and withdrew to the kitchen, returning promptly with a box of matches. Even though it was still not quite dark enough, she lit the lantern hanging from the arch of the veranda. She was about to go back to the kitchen to return the matches when Saen Baba's voice assaulted her ears. At the corner of the alley he was chanting in his deep, throaty voice:

*For when the gipsy moves his tent
Pride and glory and the rest
Will not avail nor all your best.²*

“He’s mixed up his days! It isn’t Thursday today, is it?”³ Bua mumbled as she got up and scooped up a bowlful of flour from the canister to give to the fakir as alms. As she was making for the door, the younger woman quickly took the bowl from Bua’s hands.

“Blessed be those who give; blessed too be those who do not,” chanted Saen Baba in front of the door.

The mistress of the house opened the door a crack and offered the bowl to the fakir. He emptied the contents in his own large, black begging bowl and returned the bowl to her. She nudged open the door a little further, and, still concealed behind it, asked, “Do you like mangoes, Baba?”

“Who doesn’t, daughter?”

She went in and was back in no time with two ripe mangoes. She flung the door open all the way and emerged revealing all of herself to the full view of Saen Baba, the mangoes delicately balanced in her cupped palms. She offered them to the fakir, as if in tribute.

Trying his best not to look her in the face, Saen Baba picked up the mangoes with such disciplined self-control that his fingers didn’t even brush her hands. He then blessed her and moved on ahead, chanting away in his low, bass voice.

Planted in the door frame she just kept looking for a while at how the fakir’s broad shoulders, sturdy back, and tall frame mocked the alley’s

²This translation of Nazir Akbarabadi’s verses is by Ahmed Ali, for which, see his *The Golden Tradition, An Anthology of Urdu Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), p. 187.

³Because Muslims consider it a religiously meritorious and auspicious day, beggars do their customary rounds on Thursday.

narrowness.

When she returned to the courtyard she found Bua sitting on the *taxt* with the bundle of food set by her side. “You don’t intend to spend the night here, do you?”

Bua grabbed her wrist and made her sit down beside her. Then she said, “I swear by the Holy Qur’an, my little darling, it was Khan Sahib’s mother who brought it up.”

Only half-understanding Bua’s intentions, she said, somewhat confused, “Brought what up?”

Still clutching her wrist, Bua said, “She didn’t actually say it, but she couldn’t have been more explicit. She asked me to tell her if I had a suitable match for Khan Sahib in mind.”

Gently she freed her wrist from Bua’s grip and said very softly, “Must you torment me, Bua?”

Bua was genuinely hurt. “Torment you?—I, who raised you, cherished you? How can I? My little darling, I say what I say because I care for you. Because I can’t see you suffer so.”

“And yet you keep bringing it up. Time after time. You already know my answer, don’t you? Now isn’t that tormenting?”

“Back then I could understand your hesitation. You had Bitya to worry about. Not anymore. She’s happily married.”

“Did I ever say she was a hindrance?”

“No, you didn’t. But I’m not exactly a spring chicken either. I could see. I knew. I understand.”

“As a matter of fact, you don’t. Not at all.”

“I may not be educated like you are, but I *do* understand. I know what it means to be a widow—I really do. I wasn’t young when my husband died, but I wasn’t old either. So you see, my darling, I do know.”

“Well, then, why didn’t you remarry yourself?”

“I’m sure I would have. Let’s just say I wasn’t lucky enough to find another man.”

She burst out laughing. “Who could ever win an argument with you?” she said and looked at the almost darkened sky; the evening was falling over everything in a spray of fine mist. “You’d better be leaving now, or the she-devil at the cremation grounds will get in your way!”

It was the twelfth of the lunar month, the moon so full and bright it put the pale light of the lantern to shame. It was beginning to feel less and less

stuffy. Leaves were wildly clapping in Lalaji's *pīpal*. A cool, moist gust of wind had removed the fan from her hand. A recalcitrant curl, escaping from her top-knot, dangled playfully over her cheek. Her soft, full body was spread out over the *taxt*, in a state midway between sleep and wakefulness.

A bolder gust of wind, saturated with moisture, came along: the lantern swayed, casting a maze of criss-crossing shadows on the veranda floor; the windows she had left open in the portico rattled; the little carved metal bowl lying upside-down over the clay flask tumbled a little sideways like a tilted hat; and she lifted the hem of her *kurtā* to wipe out the grit which the gust had swept up from the courtyard floor and sprinkled over her face. A bewitched moon luxuriated over the softness of her belly, planting kiss after impatient kiss, like a lover gone mad.

Somewhere far away lightning flashed amid the thunder-heads.

One, two, three . . . She counted up to fourteen. There was a second flash. She counted again. This time the thunder sounded at twelve, and the next time at only ten.

Oh, it's going to rain. And it's going to rain a lot—she thought to herself and sat up bolt upright on the *taxt*.

A stray translucent cloud passed over the moon.

She turned back to look eastward: a veritable army of clouds was on the march. Within minutes it covered the sky from end to end, throwing the entire earth into darkness. Lightning flashed again; the smallest object in the house leapt out of the cave of darkness into full, blinding light and withdrew just as quickly back into the cave's dark bowels.

But she didn't so much as stir from her place.

She recalled:

Aren't you afraid of lightning?

No.

That's something. Most women are so frightened they just about pee in their pants.

Tut-tut!

A few fat drops fell squarely on her smiling face. She heard the sound of many more fat drops pelt down on the *taxt* and the floor. She got up and went over into the veranda.

Rain was now coming down hard and in big round drops. Meeting with the parched earth it released a warm, raw fragrance that rose to her nostrils and permeated her whole being. She quickly put her reeling head against a pillar for support.

Lightning flashed again, revealing to her view bubbles in the collected

water that formed and burst almost in the same instant. She pulled her shirt-sleeve up to the elbow and stretched her hand out into the courtyard, like a beggar. The next instant her arm was drenched all the way to her elbow. She quickly pulled it back.

Her head still resting against the pillar, her glazed dreamy eyes watched and watched how the lightning leapt naked out of its mantle of clouds and then just as quickly crawled back into it, how the bubbles danced downstream, only to melt into water the next instant.

After some time she took down the lantern, lowered the flame, and went into her room.

Some ten minutes later she emerged, hesitant and cringing with modesty, exactly as she had come out of this very room a good two decades ago in the first days of her marriage: the hem of her *dupaṭṭā* drawn low over her face, shy and blushing, avoiding the glances of her parents-in-law; and her husband—seeing how she had diligently smoothed every crease in her dress, had disentangled every curl, and had searched for tell-tale marks on her neck and cheeks—he laughed noiselessly, his face buried in the pillow.

“What innocence. What naïveté!” he said. “As if Father and Mother have no idea what we’re up to!”

Carefully she closed the door behind her and padded back noiselessly to the middle of the veranda, as if afraid someone might see her.

A gust of cold, moist air slapped her across her naked body, making it shiver.

The thunder had ceased and there was no more lightning, only the rain coming down in a gentle, noiseless drizzle.

Gingerly she set one foot into the courtyard, then the other.

The rain showered its pearl-strings over her upright, self-possessing neck, her proud breasts, her bashful back, her exulting hips. Her arms came together in an embrace across her firm bosom. She raised her face up to the overcast sky and closed her eyes. Her ears heard a report of thunder as she saw the flash from behind her closed eyelids. Just then she opened her eyes.

It was raining heavily again.

Suddenly her hands shot up as if of their own volition, and her feet began to whirl over the muddied ground: round and round, faster and faster and faster. Several times the lightning flashed, the thunder clapped to stop her, but her undaunted body paid not the slightest heed; it kept turning round and round in a mad waltz, till the clouds, walls, roof, courtyard, veranda, pillars—everything began to whirl round with her.

She tottered, stumbled to the *taxt*, threw herself down on it, and covered her face with both hands.

The rain stopped, the clouds dispersed, and the moon came out again. The moon put a hand, full of caring warmth and tenderness, over her faint shoulders, as if to say: Get up now!

She slowly got up and made it to her room—disoriented, looking lost.

When she came back out a quarter of an hour later she was wearing the same *ġarāra* and *kurtā* she had on when she woke up that morning. She crossed the courtyard and started clambering up the stairs. But she stopped midway and climbed down again. She removed those flower strings of half-opened *mōtiyā* buds, now a bit wet, from the water pitcher, went up the stairs, and came into the portico.

Then she gently tossed the flower strings into a heap by the pillow and facing them lay down on the same bed she had made around noon. But she took a very long time falling asleep.

—*Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon*