

INTIZAR HUSAIN

Between Me and The Story*

THAT DAY I had picked up my pen with the intention of writing a story. I sat down with complete concentration. It so happened that the television had been left switched on in the room. Since I'm no TV addict, even popular serials and programs leave me cold and I can carry on with my reading and writing unperturbed and unaffected. But that day, it wasn't so. Although there wasn't even a particularly riveting serial or fun-and-games show on. In fact, a very serious program was being aired—a demonstration of national pride. It was a film on Pakistan's experiments with the atomic bomb. A mighty explosion occurred. The earth rumbled and shook. Then I saw the mountain quiver ever so slightly and its color began to change imperceptibly, almost like the color fading from a human face. I put down my pen. Or, perhaps, it stopped writing on its own and I had no other option but to put it down.

I remember the days from my childhood. Whenever there was a lunar or solar eclipse, my father would put aside all his chores and sit down on the prayer rug. He would offer two prayers which together he called the Prayer of Fear. He would say that a great misfortune had befallen the moon, and that we must pray to God that the crisis would be averted and that the hour of reckoning would pass without mishap. Perhaps, at this moment, just such an hour of reckoning had come for a mountain in Pakistan. In this moment of tribulation, that mountain showed such amazing grace and strength. It bore the brunt of the havoc and destruction that the explosion brought in its wake and did not allow even a hair on the people of Pakistan to be hurt. How that mountain must have suf-

*"Mērē aur Kahānī kē Bič," from the author's collection *Shahrazād kē Nām* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2002), pp. 172–80. Notes added by the translator.

ferred can be gauged from the fact that it quivered and lost its color when the explosion ripped through it. Now it would never regain its lost color.

Till yesterday, the atom bomb had been beyond our reach—a rare and extraordinary weapon of mass destruction which could only be the prized possession of superpower arsenals from across the seven seas. But in the blink of an eye, it had fallen into our hands. Strange, very strange indeed. Now we too are an atomic power. An atomic power is a superpower. And who doesn't want to be a superpower. So, now the people of India must be very happy. The people of Pakistan are also very happy. It's the superpowers who are worried now. They had signed countless agreements and counter-agreements among themselves that, come what may, they would never use these weapons of mass destruction. Now they're troubled by this classic instance of the runaway monkey and the razor—who it might slash no one knows! In the same way, who knows when these two might press the button and annihilate the rest of the world along with themselves?

These days I remember so many stories I had heard from my grandmother in my childhood. One of the stories was about a luckless prince who gets caught in the snare of a genie. The genie lived in a grand fortress. He took the prince to his fortress and let him loose, saying: You're free in every way inside this fortress. There are seven doors here. You can open six; they will lead you to a number of amazing delights. You may have your fill of those delights. But do not open the seventh door. If you do, a great calamity will befall you. The prince followed the genie's admonition for many days. Each of the six doors led to a cornucopia of plenty—there was every manner of refinement and delectation. Finally, the prince tired of these enjoyments. One day he decided to open the seventh door to find out what great pleasures it hid. But the moment he opened the seventh door, a great calamity fell on his head.

Our times, too, are caught in a genie's snare—the genie of science and technology. In small countries we aren't fully aware of it. Go to any developed country in the West. It truly appears as if the genie from Aladdin's lamp has created those magnificent buildings and fortresses. Open any door and you'll find such a bewildering array of luxuries and delights that you'll be stunned. But a seventh door has also appeared in these fortresses. The genie has instructed us to open all the other doors, but never the seventh. But occasionally I wonder, what if some eccentric prince were to get it into his head to open the seventh door, what would happen then ...

The problem, however, is that this is an age of science and technology, yet I still subscribe to ancient tales and old stories of genies and fairies. My friends tell me that these old yarns are a reminder of mankind's earliest childhood when the human intellect was not fully formed and superstitions reigned supreme. Today, in this age of scientific temperament, man depends solely on his wit and intelligence. But I want to know: has the child really grown up? One hears that in the West he has grown to full adulthood in the lap of science and philosophy and has become a veritable model of intelligence. The atom bomb was crafted by his genius, just as Hiroshima was a spectacular example of his brilliance.

Anyhow, in this age of knowledge, when technology is at its zenith, forests and deserts and oceans and mountains and birds and animals are all at risk. My friends say, brother, this is a manifestation of the conquest of nature, and they quote verses by the great poet Iqbal to buttress their theory. I, too, recall some bits of Iqbal. Two couplets are as follows:

Dhūñḍnē-wālā sitārōñ kī guzargāhōñ kā
Apnē afkār kī duniyā mēñ safar kar na sakā
Jisnē suraj kī shu'ā'ōñ kō giraftār kiyā
Zindagī kī shab-e tārīk sahar kar na sakā
 He tracked the orbits of the stars, yet could not
 Travel in the world he had created in his thoughts
 He captured the rays of the sun, yet could not
 Make the sun rise on life's dark night

If anything, life's dark night has become even darker since. And is darkening further every day. If there was a ray of hope left somewhere, that too has been snuffed out by the coming of the atom bomb.

So here I come back to my old song of distress. I have been singing this song for a very long time. In 1960 when the magnificently tall peepal tree beside the gate of Punjab University was cut down, I felt as though a murder had been committed in broad daylight and a benign presence had been snatched from over our heads. For so long I had watched eager young students passing by under its dense shade chattering and chatting. How many stories lay beneath that guileless chit-chat—the tree alone could have told. But there it lay, face down on the Mall, with those sto-

¹From the poem "Zamāna-e Hāzīr kā Insān," *Zarb-e Kalim*, in Muḥammad Iqbāl, *Kulliyāt-e Iqbāl—Urdū* (Lahore: Shaikh Ghulām 'Alī & Sons Publishers, 1973), p. 531.

ries buried forever in its bosom. I used to work for the *Mashriq*² in those days. I had turned my face away from politics and wrote only of small matters concerning people, trees and birds. So I wrote a column on the martyrdom of the tree and went to various literary circles pleading its cause. At that time, progressive and traditional writers met at these soirees and discussed all sorts of literary issues. The traditionalists couldn't understand why the hacking down of a tree was being presented as a human tragedy and a literary concern. My progressive friends made my plea out to be a war between the progressives and the "regressives." Their argument was that Pakistan is entering an industrial era. So trees will be felled. How can the nation progress otherwise?

Trees began to be chopped down indiscriminately from then on. One day I received a strange phone call. Begum Hijab Imtiaz Ali³ was on the line: "Intizar Sahib, are you aware that the koel⁴ has been silent in the city this year. The month of June has begun and no one has heard the koel coo. Tell me, have you heard it?"

I thought of my morning walks in Jinnah Bagh and remembered with surprise that the season for the koel's calls had begun. But so far, I hadn't heard its call, not from close quarters, nor from far away. Why hadn't I thought about it sooner?

"You're right, madam. I haven't heard the koel's call so far this season either."

"Then why haven't you written about it in your column? People should know about it. Write about it, Intizar Sahib. Tell people that this is a matter of grave concern. So, will you write then?"

"Yes, I will."

Truly, this was a matter I should have written about. It made perfect sense to me. After all, some part of the natural world had to protest against the massacre of trees. And the protest came from the koels. They decided to remain silent and thus deprive us of their mellifluous cooing.

²An Urdu newspaper published from Lahore, Pakistan.

³A prominent feminist writer. She was born in 1903 and wrote her first story at the age of eleven. She also qualified as the first female licensed pilot of the British empire in 1936. She died in Lahore in 1999 at the age of 96.

⁴A bird of the nightingale family, famous on the Indian subcontinent for its melodious call.

The latest issue of *Savērā*⁵ has just reached me. Salahuddin Mahmood⁶ has written in his article that birds, butterflies and fishes are committing mass suicides in different parts of the world. Nasir Kazmi⁷ once wrote

Ur̄ gā'ē yeh shākh sē kah-kar t̄uyūr
Is gulistān kī havā zehr hai
 The birds have fled from the branches, saying
 There is poison in the air of this garden

But where will they fly off to now? Man has poisoned not just the air in the garden, but all over the created world. The birds and the butterflies can't take hold of the hands of foolish, barbaric man to stop him from leaking poison into the air and making life lifeless on the earth that God created. At best, the koels can fall silent in protest. Birds and butterflies can turn away despondently from this foul universe and commit mass suicide. A sensitive butterfly and a twittering bird can give no other answer to man's cruelty and ignorance. They have no deterrent.

But we come back to the same thing; what good is our crying and pleading? We aren't persons of any importance. Even Bill Clinton is ignored. No one pays any heed to him. In the atomic fracas between India and Pakistan, even American bravado has disappeared in a wisp of smoke. This sea change in the world order is remarkable. In Pakistan's youth it had learned to live in the shadow of two giants, both superpowers, both astonishingly terrifying. Small countries sought refuge from the wrath of the superpowers. If a small country annoyed either one, it would immediately scurry to find a safe haven under the wings of the other. If one frowned with annoyance, the other would rush forward to provide shelter and patronage.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, this balance of powers was overturned. Anis wrote an elegy at the death of Dabeer, both famous elegy-writers: the joy of writing elegies is gone. He was right. Be it poetics or literature, politics or sports, the cricket field or any other field, a virtuoso's real talents are unfurled only when he meets his match. America

⁵A Lahore-based quarterly literary journal started some time before 1947. It appeared more or less regularly until the 1960s but has since become quite sporadic.

⁶One-time Honorary Editor of *Savērā*. He was a poet and died in 1998.

⁷Nāṣir Kāzmī (1925–72) was a prominent Pakistani poet.

failed to grasp this basic truth. But so what? In the past, recalcitrant children would flout the instructions of one grown-up, but submit to another. If they disobeyed one particular elder, they would obey some other. The practice of obedience, nevertheless, remained intact. But now, only one elder remains. If someone disregards him, who can he be expected to listen to? Children have become headstrong. Their disregard knows no bounds. Earlier, it was the leftist intellectuals who were hell-bent on breaking all the rules. It was a strangely stimulating situation. The more headstrong the leftists became, the loftier became the stance of the extreme rightists. American hegemony still remained intact. However, soon the leftists became an endangered species in Pakistan. In fact, the breed seems to have died out since the collapse of the Soviet Union. But how has that helped America? No, if anything, it has harmed American interests. With the fall of Communism, the anti-US chant has been picked up by the Maulvi-Mullah brigade. The Maulvi-Mullahs may not have gained the same mileage as the left-wing intellectuals, but America has certainly lost out in the bargain. It is no longer the presiding deity it had been for so long.

Anyhow, as I was saying, children have become disobedient. Their irreverence knows no bounds and those who were once the elders are now completely disregarded. In such a scenario anything can happen, now that the atom bomb has fallen into the hands of the children.

Only time will tell what will happen next. For now, our heads are raised high with pride. But look what a firecracker our friend Enver Sajjad⁸ has set off. At a time like this, when the People's Party is trying to remind the people of Pakistan that the credit for acquiring the atom bomb must rightfully go to Bhutto Sahib, Enver Sajjad has dug up evidence to show that Manto was actually the first man who dreamt of atomic power for Pakistan. And he has cited Manto's writings in the form of letters to Uncle Sam. Sajjad read his article in a discussion organized by a newspaper and sent a copy for me to read. I read the article and was overwhelmed by sheer astonishment that Manto had had such a dream! According to Enver Sajjad, Manto's dream was simply waiting for a man of action who would make it come true. This man of action eventually took the form of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who was instrumental in giving Manto's vision a concrete shape.

⁸A Pakistani writer of modern, abstract short stories. He is also a painter and stage actor.

I read the letters Manto wrote to Uncle Sam a second time. Once again, I was lost in amazement. This time, I was perplexed more by Enver Sajjad than the letters. There was a world of difference between what Manto had written and the meaning Enver Sajjad had derived from what Manto had written. Manto never wrote Enver Sajjad's brand of abstract short stories, where anyone can ascribe any meaning he or she wants. Manto writes fairly straightforward satire. He asks Uncle Sam why the hydrogen bomb is being prepared. Which countries are going to be wiped off the surface of the earth? And if that is the plan, then how about giving a small atom bomb to a favorite nephew who is sick and tired of those fellows across the border who don't believe in wiping their butts? Why not just get rid of them once and for all?

This reminds me of a Bombay film called "Eight Days," made shortly before the Partition. Manto acted in this film and had probably also written its script. He played the role of a half-wit who goes around with a ball in his hand, which he calls an atom bomb, and scares everyone by threatening to hurl it. The idea of this film scares me. But then, I'm a coward. These days, the people of Asia are under the spell of the atom bomb. Some are worried about its long-term consequences, but many others are delighted by the magical wand that has fallen into their hands. The atom bomb has had different effects on different people. Its effect on me is that I cannot write a story anymore. On Enver Sajjad, the effect has been totally different. Strange, very strange indeed ... First, he saluted the Marxist revolution, then became a fervent devotee of the Islamic bomb. In his article he has appealed to the Muslim community that now that we have become an atomic power, we must strive to become an Islamic superpower.

Yeh inqilāb mubārak hō mōminōñ kē liyē

May the revolution bring happiness to the Believers!

Consider this, even in this new world-order Enver Sajjad has found a mission for himself. And I, I have again gotten left behind. I can see no other mission save the modest one of writing a story. And my story, too, is surrounded by difficulties. Whenever I pick up my pen, the mountain of Chaghai comes and stands before my eyes. First a slight rumble shivers through it, then its color begins to change. Periodically, a sound emerges which causes panic among the people. The entire city lives in the thrall of

this Calling Mountain.⁹ No other sound reaches here. Suddenly, the mountain loses all color. Its effect on me is like the call from the Calling Mountain. The magic of the atom bomb does not work on me. I live in the tormented shadow of that mountain. I can write my story only if I'm able to break away from its paralyzing fear. But this pain-riddled mountain has come and it stands between me and the story. □

—Translated by Rakhshanda Jalil

⁹Kōh-e Nidā, a legendary mountain which called out to people passing by it; it is frequently mentioned in Subcontinental *qisṣas* and *kahāniyāns*.