

QAISER QASRI

## Thoo Thoo\*

THE KAPTAI ROAD is now open,” I said to him. “Come on, let’s go for a walk.”

He kept sitting on Husna’s chair, his head cocked to one side and his feet dangling. He never listened to anything said to him the first time. It was rare that he heard things repeated for a second time. I put my hands on my back and leaned over him, saying: “Change your clothes quickly. We have to be back before it gets dark.”

He moved his head slowly, as if some outside power was preventing him from moving. It was the first time in several days that I was examining him closely. The same listlessness in his bulging eyes. Dried yellowed and blackened skin on his face, like a drum that has been in use for a long time. A head of thick, curly hair with hair licks jutting upward in several places. The crescent of a scar extending from his temple to his eyelid, blackened in some places, blue in others. I turned my face away from him and stood up straight. Now I’ll do what I always do. I’ll take him by the hand and lead him to the bathroom. I’ll wash his face myself. I’ll change his clothes. And when I lead him to the car and open the door, he’ll climb quietly into the seat next to me. That’s all he does by himself. He’ll get into the car and continue sitting until I take his hand and ask him to get out. My God, why do I keep him here?

The road wasn’t as noisy as it used to be in the past, but there was no shortage of people. A crowd of devotees thronged the *chillagah* of Hazrat Bayazeed. Women, men and children were going in quietly and then coming out. Beyond the *chillagah*, the road appeared deserted and lonely, and in East Pakistan, whenever you see a road devoid of people, goats and traffic, a sense of the transient nature of the world fills your heart with such a strange feeling that there are no words to describe it. History tells us that most people who renounce the world take to the

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jungles of Bengal. I slowed down the car and turned to him: “Thoo Thoo, I’ll throw you in that lake over there. Can there be a prettier place to die? The water is cold. All around there are hills covered with betel-nut, banana and rubber trees, and the pretty Chakma women come here to plant rice in the soil collecting on the slopes of those hills. You can sleep peacefully in such a place till eternity, OK?”

Everything was OK for him. He sat without making a sound, his eyes fixed on something outside the window. Throw him in the water and he’ll keep staring like this. Even the questioning angels Munkir and Nakeer won’t waste any time on him. But I have a lot of free time on my hands, and many things to say with nobody to listen.

I put my hand on his shoulder and said, “Look here. The lake seems to be joined to the road, but it isn’t really. You have to go down to the lake walking carefully on the wet clay. Razia slipped here. If Hasan hadn’t caught hold of her in time and supported her, she would have landed right in the lake. Now she’s fallen again, into the lake, and Hasan has gone in with her. When you grow up, if you can pull them out, you must get them out of the lake. Are you listening, Thoo Thoo?” I couldn’t help laughing. The boy was staring at me with his eyes gaping wide. The lake was left behind. And the day when Razia had slipped and Hasan had gotten stuck in the mud trying to save her from falling was left even further behind. Razia’s kamiz and shalwar were splattered with mud, but she laughed a long time when she saw Hasan. Those laughing days are long gone. But the laughter still pursues me, and this silent five- or six-year-old sitting next to me can’t hear the ringing laughter of the past. He can’t even understand the matters of today. What should I do with him, O my God?

Hearing the sound of the approaching car, a Chakma woman scrambled to hide. She was probably picking a ripe pineapple from a bush. Like a doe flitting past the scrawny yellow-leaved banana trees, she added color to the quiet late-afternoon scene. She had an *angocha* tied around her waist and a strip of cloth across her chest.

“Twenty years ago, these Chakmas used to roam around completely naked.” Hasan seems to bring his lips close to my ears to speak to me. He used to sit next to me in the same spot where Thoo Thoo is sitting today.

“So why did they put on clothes?”

“We Bengalis made them put on clothes. Slowly and steadily we’re moving into their settlements. A short distance from Kaptai, Bengalis and Chakma live in the same village. Our women observe purdah. Their women have also started covering certain parts of their bodies. Across the river, their old civilization is still alive. Over there the people make the

best lungis on their spinning wheels. But they come to this side of the river to sell them, they never wear lungis themselves ”

“Then who wears them?” Razia asks from the back. She would always sit in the backseat between my wife Shahwar and my daughter Husna. No matter how quietly Hasan and I would be talking and no matter how loudly the engine purred, she always managed to hear what we were talking about.

“We wear them—we Bengalis.”

“Oh, so that’s how it is. No wonder then, I keep saying to myself how come you lazy bones get clothes to cover your nakedness. All right then, tell me who grows the rice for you?”

“The Punjabis grow it.” Hasan becomes annoyed. “And they come here and gobble it all up too. After all, they have to use their mouths.”

“So, is that it?” Razia says animatedly. “So then this means a holiday for you. But this jute and such stuff, you Bengalis probably grow that by yourselves.”

“Oh no!” Hasan says with a smile. “It grows by itself. And for thrashing out the fibers, I think we Bengalis should procure some Punjabi women by marrying them. They can skin a man alive so they should have no difficulty thrashing jute!”

“Hmm. Then go get a Punjabi woman. Ever take a look in the mirror?”

“Yes,” Hasan sighs. “I definitely haven’t taken a look in the mirror. If a certain Punjabi woman lets me, I may get to see a mirror someday!” I glance at Razia’s face in the car’s mirror. A shy smile lights up her face. Perhaps her shyness is because my wife and I are there.

Trying to break the silence, my wife starts to say: “Now we’re really beginning to enjoy the outing. There’s no fun unless and until there’s some friction between these two!”

“She’s out of her mind, Baji!” Hasan replies. “When I was talking about the Chakma and the Bengalis, I didn’t mean Bengalis as if there are Punjabis and Bengalis. These Chakma people regard all Muslims as Bengalis. So, because you’re civilized and you’re wearing clothes, they think of you as Bengalis too!”

“This is funny!” Razia got her chance again. “These Chakma people think of all Muslims as Bengalis and we regard all Bengalis as Hindus!”

“You won’t let go, will you?” Hasan shows her his fist. “Will you please stop the car next to the lake? Unless I give her a few dips in the water, she won’t come to her senses.”

“You can’t even take a dip yourself. Even for that you’ll need to import some Hindus from Calcutta!”

“Why import them? There are many Hindu pilgrims visiting Sinakund

these days. And you may not need so many dips. You're so honorable yourself that a handful of water would be enough!"

"Don't talk about honor!" Razia makes a face. "I'm a regular wheat-eater, and it was for the sake of this very wheat that Grandpa chose to move out of Paradise. I don't eat rice and fish!"

"Wait till we reach Kaptai," Hasan responds. "If I don't throw you in the lake, I'll have to change my name. You may not eat fish but the fish will relish eating you!"

Who would the fish have eaten first? That handsome engineer with the high forehead, shapely nose and lovely eyes who was proud of being a Bengali, but even more proud of being, first of all, a Pakistani? Or that spirited girl with brown eyes, fair complexion and light hair, the daughter of an old civil servant from British times, but who took pride in being a Punjabi, loved every inch of the Bengali land, and loved that Bengali engineer more than her own life? I can still hear her talking. Trying to impress Hasan with her expertise in Bangla, she tells my wife, "Shahwar Baji, *ki shondor desho. Abie aikhanay moray nay chai*" (What a beautiful country. I would not like to die here).

It is really a beautiful scene. Far off in the distance, across the river, the sun is about to set in the paddy fields. A herd of goats is just ahead so the car is moving very slowly. And moving ever so slowly is a boat in the paddy fields below the level of the road, and the man rowing the boat is sitting on the edge holding the oars. His wife is putting some oil in a lantern hanging from a bamboo pole. It's a beautiful scene, but Razia's jabbing remarks have saddened Hasan. He turns his face backwards and tells her in Punjabi, "*Sanboon wi thaaday naal marna aiye*" (I'll die with you, too).

"Abbi," my daughter Husna has a question. "Which language are Hasan Chacha and Razia *Khala* speaking when they say *shondor* and *thaday*?"

We all laugh. I tell her, "There is a language of love, Dali. It doesn't need any words. If there is any hatred in the heart, words begin to eat up that language."

Hasan bursts out laughing. "You wouldn't have understood what your Abbu is saying, Dali"

Husna is annoyed and, turning her face away, she begins to look out the rear. Thoo Thoo is looking out the front.

"Which language do you understand, Thoo Thoo?"

Approaching the Chandragona hills, I slowed down the car.

"Look over there" I said to Thoo Thoo. "The first road on the left. There are some factories over there, and farther down the road there are

villages of true, honest, pious Muslims. These Muslims recited the *kalima* before attacking and killing other Muslims, because the other Muslims didn't speak the same language. You don't understand my language either. Will you grow up to murder me, Thoo Thoo?"

Thoo Thoo is looking out the window. He has no clue what he will do when he grows up. He has no idea what language was spoken by those who came to kill his elders and guardians. His heart is emptied of every emotion, except fear. And perhaps it's devoid of fear too. He's a living image of the kind of people who were plentiful in this region ten or fifteen years ago.

"Oh you Jangli people!" the harsh voice of Razia's father echoed through my mind. "Did your fathers ever have clean water to drink that you come asking us to install a pipe-line for you?"

They had come a long distance, and after submitting their application, they sat for many hours outside the bungalow waiting to be called in. An American missionary who used to preach in their villages had told them that cholera, black fever, and stomach ulcers were common there because they drank the dirty water from the ponds. He had said that God and His Son, Jesus Christ, do not like some people to live in luxury while all the others are afflicted with dirt, squalor, disease and ignorance. They had put all this in their application saying that, because we are Muslims, we must live with greater cleanliness. I was there at the time. They heard the reply from Razia's father and didn't say anything. They looked at each other with blank expressions and then dispersed silently.

The Chittagong Sea remains calm and muddy, but when the waves suddenly begin to swell, even large ships are tossed up and pulled towards the shore. The faces of the people going back were muddy and calm. Thoo Thoo's face is like that too. Hatred, fear, love—who knows what waves are swelling up in his breast.

"I think your friend Hasan has gone crazy," my wife Shahwar had remarked when she heard the whole story. "Will he get along with Razia? Just imagine if someday Razia's father makes such a remark in front of him."

But Hasan didn't think in those terms. Razia herself narrated the whole incident to him. The next day when we were going for our daily outing, he told my wife: "Don't be so concerned about this, Baji. Just put in some good words for me with Razia's mother."

"No sir!" Razia chimed in quickly. "I'm not interested in drinking water from some dirty pond."

"Why don't you think about it carefully?" I started explaining to them just to humor my wife. "Razia's father is really rather too much of a

Punjabi.”

“He’s not a Punjabi.” Hasan said with great emphasis. “Professor Guha from our college may keep saying he’s a Punjabi, but I know that he’s not.”

“Oh, be quiet, please!” Razia said feigning anger. “Be careful if you say anything about my dad.”

“I’m not saying anything about him. I’m talking about the civil officers from the British era. Colonial officers have no caste or ethnicity. They’re in Bengal and they’re abusing us. If they were serving in the Punjab, they would have the Punjabis to curse and malign. This is what I know. Professor Guha knows this too, but he’s reaping the benefits himself. For the two last days, he’s been repeating the story until the college is ready to burst into flames.”

“My father’s era is finished.” Razia became serious. “It’s our time now. Wherever the old generation is leaving a wound, we’ll apply balm.”

Hasan responded with weak laughter. “We?” he said. “Who are we? We are what we’re made out to be. Our newspapers, our radio, our leaders, our colleges, our movies—all of them are turning us into something, and apart from that what else can we become?”

Hasan and Razia were not what all these things were trying to turn them into. Their hearts were filled with so much love that there was little space left for hatred, and probably Razia’s father didn’t hate things as much as his attitude seemed to suggest. If he hated things so much, why would he allow his only child to get married to a Bengali engineer straight out of college and dependent upon his recommendations in order to get a job.

We could see an Army jeep approaching. When it came closer, it stopped. The officer sitting next to the driver signaled with his hand for me to stop.

“Don’t go any further. The road isn’t clear.”

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing much. Enemy agents tried to put dynamite in the headworks to blow it up. We’ve captured them, but you shouldn’t go there.”

The headworks? My God! These cruel people have killed Hasan and now they want to blow up his soul with dynamite.

I turned the car back. Thoo Thoo sat silently in his place. He wasn’t interested in the car going forward or back. I had hardly covered a hundred yards when I had to stop the car again. The same jeep was parked in the middle of the road and the officer was waiting for me.

“Isn’t this road clear either?” I asked him, making no effort to conceal my sarcasm.

“No, that’s not the problem.” He was staring at Thoo Thoo. “Who is this boy sitting next to you?”

“Don’t know” I replied. “I call him Thoo Thoo.”

“Is he a muhajir?”

“Don’t know.”

“Looks like a Bengali. Why were you taking him to that deserted area?”

Then I realized what was troubling the officer. I tried to explain to him that I used to go there with my wife, my daughter, my friend and his wife, who was also a friend of my wife, for sightseeing. Since none of them are alive now, I bring this boy here every day. He doesn’t understand what I say but whatever I need to tell my departed ones, he hears it and doesn’t fret over it.

The officer’s face had a look of incredulousness. “He’s a Bengali. Hand him over to us. We’ll take him to the camp with us. If his parents are still alive they’ll come and get him.”

“I’m his father,” I said. “I’ve gotten him from the hospital. I have the permission of the martial law authorities. If you want, you can come with me to my house and see it for yourself.”

“Oh?” the officer responded. “It’s all right. Take good care of him. Boy, want to come with me?”

The boy did not say anything. I explained that it has been three months since he came to my house and during these three months he has uttered only one word, “Thoo Thoo.” That’s why I call him Thoo Thoo.

The officer laughed. “What a cruel thing!” he said. “Nobody knows how many children’s lives have wasted away.”

He drove away in his jeep. I started my car too. One word in three months: Thoo Thoo.

There was a shortage of space in the hospital and they put him on a dhurrie right next to my bed. Those coming to the hospital were drawn more towards him than me.

“Oh, those cruel people haven’t even spared this little one.”

“Can’t tell whether he was attacked with stones or sticks.”

“His eyes were spared, this is enough.”

He wouldn’t utter a word. Not even a moan. There was a shortage of staff in the hospital. A number of times I tried to find out if he needed anything to eat or drink. A number of times I tried to get up from my bed and comfort him. But as soon as I got up, he would close even the one eye that wasn’t bandaged. At first I thought that he was afraid of the bandages I have on my own face, head and shoulders, but after my bandages were removed, I began to think that he was afraid of my scarred, cut-up

face. I would turn my face to the other side and ask him, “Boy, what’s your name?”

He wouldn’t reply. I would ask, “*Tumar bari kothay?*” (Where’s your house?). No reply.

“*Tumi ki Banglāy bhasha kotha boltay paro?*” (Can you speak in Bangla language?)

Then one day, I got out of bed and sat down next to him. “*Bhai karona*” (*Don’t be afraid*), I said, “*Ami tumar bandho*” (I’m your friend).

He shut his eyes, then opened them again. Wild, lackluster eyes. Then a sharp flash of pain became visible in his eyes. Such dark shadows of fear in the eyes of a five-year-old. As if a demon has been chasing him for centuries. When they were stabbing my Husna with knives, what form did the fear and terror take in her innocent little eyes?

I came a little closer and said to him, “*Amar priyo batsbo bhai karona. Ama kay tumar pitar to manay karo*” (My dear child, don’t be afraid. I am like your father).

The shadows of fear in his eyes dissolved and the pupils remained fixed in one position. I brought my face close to his.

“*Amar priyo batsbo*” (My dear child), I said to him in a gentle, loving voice, and then his lips started trembling. The veins of his neck became stretched, and without closing his mouth he repeated the same single word twice: “Thoo Thoo.”

From that moment there was a bond between us. “Thoo” was the last word I had heard from my wife Shahwar. “Thoo.” I had been tied to the coconut tree, and with sharp, pointed knives, they were cutting pieces of flesh from my face, arms and chest. She was lying tied up in front of me but I couldn’t see her, because my eyes had turned to stone the moment they tore her clothes, and my ears refused to register a single sound after the deep, prolonged scream emanating from little Husna’s throat struck my eardrums. But even then, I had heard the last word Shahwar uttered, “Thoo.” Did you hear the same word from your sister or mother, Thoo Thoo?

Spread out like an oval-shaped cup in the midst of the green hills—I again came to the lake where Razia had slipped. I can look at this small lake, but I can’t reach the larger one where the memories of Shahwar, Husna, Hasan and Razia want to take me.

Husna was always unhappy going down the stairs of the powerhouse. “Hasan Chacha, why do you make us go down every day? I don’t like your revolving cannons one tiny bit!”

“Those aren’t cannons, Dali,” Hasan would explain to her patiently. “Cannons are for use against the enemy. Your chacha isn’t willing to take



another person's life. I'm only interested in lighting up the dark night. You're afraid of the dark, aren't you? Hasan Chacha has installed these machines here which produce electricity."

"This is the only big achievement of your uncle," Razia would tell Dali. "After all, he is a Bengali!"

"I'm a Pakistani, Dali!" Hasan said. "And if your Razia *Khala* isn't proud of this powerhouse, then she's not a Pakistani, and so she's neither a Punjabi nor a Bengali!"

"Tell your chacha to climb up to the roof of the powerhouse and give the call for prayer!" Razia would respond. But this teasing banter never affected Hasan for long.

"As long as this powerhouse continues to generate electricity," he would say, his chest swelling up with pride, "as long as the electricity produced here runs the industries in Karnaphuli and Chandragona, and the city of Chittagong is lighted, your Hasan Chacha will hold his head high. Every Pakistani will hold his head high. When you're grown up, Dali, you'll be proud of your chacha. This is our first powerhouse built without the help of foreign engineers. It has given us confidence in ourselves."

At this very moment I can see him in my mind's eye, going down the steps to the underground passage. Dali is hanging from his neck and once again he's telling us about each and every thing, despite having done so many times before. This is how the boiler was installed. How the generator was fitted. How the level of the underground water was miscalculated the first time and how the mistake was corrected. What happens when you press this button. What we do when this particular thing doesn't work. Sometimes he would take us down the spiraling iron staircase where the danger light was installed. Going up the dizzying staircase with the terrifying sound of the gigantic pistons moving with frightening speed, Husna would cling to him with fear and remain completely still. None of us liked the steep staircase, but we never refused to go up with him because his enthusiasm made us keep pace with him.

They want to blow up this powerhouse, Hasan, so there will be complete darkness from Chittagong to Dhaka. So the industries of Karnaphuli and Chandragona will come to a stand still. So the heads of those who trusted their own products will hang down in shame. They killed you and threw your body in this lake, because you used to like this lake. And they threw Razia in along with you, because she liked this lake and she liked you. And now they want to wound your soul. If the powerhouse is destroyed, you will stop visiting me in my imagination. I don't want to recall the scene of my wife and my daughter's death, but just once I'd like

to see how you and Razia shook hands with the Angel of Death. I'd like to know what the angel had to do to change your smiling, confident faces and darken them with fear. When the people coming from Calcutta and Sitakund were destroying Razia's body and soul, in what language did she call out for you? In what language did you reply? Toward whose corpse did the fish in the lake turn first?

Thoo Thoo's eyes were shut. This made me laugh.

It's the first time the drive has made him sleepy. Now I'll take him home, wash his face, change his clothes. I'll take the leftovers from the afternoon meal out of the refrigerator and put them on the table. I'll take him to the table but he won't eat anything until I start feeding him with my own hands. Today I'll do no such thing. Are you listening, Thoo Thoo?

Thoo Thoo had gone to sleep, and when I parked the car in the garage, he was still sleeping. I left him there. I shut the gate and, without changing, went to lie down on my bed. Let me see how long this bungling child will remain asleep, sitting in the car.

Around one o'clock in the morning, I was awakened by the sensation of fingers touching my hair. Thoo Thoo was sitting on a stool next to my bed, staring at me. As soon as I opened my eyes, he cringed with fear and pulled back. But immediately, he straightened up.

"What's the matter, *batsbo?*" I asked him. For the first time in three months, I saw a sign of confidence in his eyes.

"Baba," he said. "Have your food."

And then I noticed. A dhurrie had been spread on the floor next to my bed and on it the leftovers from the afternoon meal were portioned out on plates, ready to eat. □

—Translated by Asif Farrukhi