

SALAM BIN RAZZAQ

A Sheet*

HE WAS STANDING behind the window looking out onto the street, which, as far as one could see in the distance, was shimmering in the sun as if somebody had magically stopped a flowing river. It was the same street on which traffic flowed uninterrupted well into the night, where crowds of people milled about like crawling ants right up to midnight. Morning and evening, the noise from the traffic and the people gave the sidewalks the atmosphere of a carnival. But at the moment, both the street and its sidewalks were completely deserted. Not a soul anywhere, not even a sound.

His mind too was as empty as the street in front of him. Now and then, though, a whirlwind of some inarticulate anxiety or fear did sweep over him. Dread and despair had begun to thicken around him like a gloom, and he felt smothered by it. He picked up the packet of cigarettes from the table near him, lit up, drew a deep breath, and exhaled the smoke out the window. There was no wind at all. The smoke dissolved slowly, like life ebbing away from a dying patient. He longed for home. The image of his beautiful wife Salma, the innocent pranks of his sons Sajid and Majid, and the deep affection in the eyes of his old, paralytic mother flashed before his eyes. Salma had told him as he was leaving, "It doesn't look good at all in Bombay. I'm worried."

But he had tried to allay her fears. "Riots are common in big cities like Bombay. Nothing to get so worked up about. They usually don't affect business there at all."

"But you said you were going to Dadar. Dadar is one of the places affected by riots. The newspaper said so."

"Oh, come on now. After all, Vidyacharan also lives there. I'll go to his house first. I'll meet the party with him."

"What if you waited a few days?"

"You don't understand. Vidya told me that these people are absolutely genuine. The supermarket under construction there in Bhawani Peth be-

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longs to that party. Two or three local interior decorators are bending over backwards to somehow clinch the deal for themselves, but Vidya wants me to get the contract. He's the chief engineer. It's a big contract, worth several lakhs. Such an opportunity's not likely to come my way again in a long time. I'll take the bus straight from Dadar after the deal and be back home in Pune by the evening. Don't you worry."

Salma didn't say anything further, but the cloud of worry still didn't quite leave her face.

He tossed the cigarette butt out through the window, stepped back and half-stretched out on the sofa. The ceiling fan was whirring away, making a muffled sound, like someone trying to let something out but held back by a nagging fear. Even though he was perfectly safe here, he still could feel fear surge up inside him like a wave. Vidya, Vidya's father, Vidya's mother—they all tried to fortify him with reassuring words. Vidyacharan's wife Sushma and his sister Arti kept piling more *puris* and servings of vegetable on his plate, and Vidyacharan's younger brother Shyam kept inviting him to games of carom. In short, the entire household was doing its best to draw his heart away from the thoughts that troubled him. All the same, he could feel his heart weighed down deeper with anxiety with every passing moment.

It was around one o'clock in the afternoon when he got down from the Ashiyad bus at the Dadar terminal. He strode over to the sidewalk and stood there, his smallish briefcase in hand, looking for a taxi. But he spotted none. There was very little traffic on the street. Most of the stores had their shutters pulled down. The sidewalk had only a few pedestrians, who walked on swiftly with a purposeful gait, looking cautiously around, as though they were in a big rush to get somewhere. There was a strange but palpable tension in the air. He suddenly remembered what Salma had told him in the morning as he was leaving. An anxious thought reared up inside him, which he quickly shrugged off with a light jerk of his neck. Just then he saw a taxi approach from the right, carrying no fare. He stepped down from the sidewalk and waved, but the taxi just zoomed past him without stopping. The driver didn't even so much as look at him. He was sitting behind the steering wheel like a statue, his hands frozen on the wheel. Afterwards a couple more taxis came along, but not one stopped. "OK," he thought. "I can just walk. Vidyacharan's house isn't all that far anyway. It'll take at most ten minutes to get there."

He set out, briefcase in hand. After crossing the main street, he entered a passageway under the street, he felt even more acutely the sense of gravity in the air. The entire passageway was infused with an eerie silence, and the sound of his footfalls was making his blood freeze in his

veins. The passageway ended in a series of buildings, but most had their gates closed. Some four or five young men stood in a group in front of one of the buildings, heatedly discussing something or other. Seeing him approach, one of the young men said something to his companions. They all fell silent and looked over their shoulders at him. He lowered his eyes and took long strides past them. He didn't turn around to look at them, but he could hear that they had resumed talking. He entered the gate of Building 11 and took the stairs to the third floor, where he pressed the bell to Vidyacharan's apartment.

Vidyacharan himself opened the door. The moment he saw him, he said, "Arey, Anwar! Come on in. We were waiting just for you."

Inside, Vidyacharan's father was sitting in a wooden swing-seat poring over a fat tome. He closed the book as soon as he saw him and said, "We were quite worried about you, son! You didn't have any problem on the way, did you?"

"No, Uncle. But I did feel a strange tension in the air. The streets are deserted, shops are closed, and I couldn't even get a single taxi to stop."

"Yes, it's been like this for the last two or three days. Today, though, the atmosphere appears to be even more grim."

"I called your house this morning," Vidyacharan said. "Bhabhi said that you'd already left about an hour earlier. If I'd caught you on the phone, I'd have told you not to come today."

"What's the matter? Is it really serious?"

"Seems that way. Police cars are out patrolling. And there are rumors everywhere. About a hundred huts were torched last night in Dharavi. We could see the smoke even from here in the morning. I just heard on the telephone that several chawls have been set on fire in Jogeshwari as well."

Now his heart began to sink even deeper, like a heavy stone in water. He could feel a faint restlessness squirm inside him. His silence prompted Vidyacharan to comfort him, "There's no reason for you to worry. Everything is OK. Here, give me your briefcase."

Vidyacharan took the briefcase from him and he sat down on the sofa. Meanwhile Sushma appeared with a glass and jug of water. After greeting him, she set the glass and the jug on the tea table, smiled and asked, "How are Bhabhi and the children?"

"They're fine," he responded, smiling formally.

In the meantime both Vidyacharan's mother and sister walked in. "Vidya!" the old lady said to her son, "Take Anwar to wash his hands. Lunch is ready."

Shortly thereafter low wooden stools were set on the floor and everybody took their seats. *Thalis* were placed in front of everyone, and Sushma

and Arti dutifully served the food. He took a look around and said, "I don't see Shyam. Where is he?"

"He's gone to college. He'll be back soon."

After the meal he picked up a piece of betel nut from the saucer and put it in his mouth. Then he said, "Vidya, shouldn't we go now and take care of the job? I'll take the bus home right after."

"But the office is closed today ... because of the riots. I called you this morning to tell you just that."

"Oh." Anxiety deepened in the lines on his forehead. "In that case, allow me to leave. I should return right away. Otherwise Salma and Mother will start worrying."

"All right. But I think you should take the train instead. Let me walk you to the station."

"Uncle, I'm leaving now," he looked at Vidyacharan's father.

"OK, son. Given the situation, we can't even ask you to stay over. But be careful. Give us a call as soon as you've arrived in Pune." His voice was full of concern.

Just then the bell rang. Vidyacharan opened the door and in walked Shyam. The minute he saw him, he said, "Arey, Anwar Bhaiyya! When did you arrive?" He then came over and sat down right next to him.

"About an hour ago. Tell me, how are your studies?"

"A-1. And I mean A-1 ..."

"How is it outside?" Vidyacharan inquired.

"Bhaiyya, it isn't good. Somebody was knifed outside the railway station just a little while ago. Police cars are patrolling everywhere. A curfew's been declared in the area around the station."

Abruptly everyone fell silent. He looked up, only to see that everyone else was looking just at him. Vidyacharan cleared his throat and said, "Let me call Inspector Rana and find out."

Vidyacharan got up and dialed the number. He talked with someone briefly, hung up and returned to the sofa.

"What did the inspector say?" he asked feeling impatient.

"He said that the trains are running all right, but the situation isn't at all good. A curfew is expected in the entire area any time. News has just come that a terrible riot's broken out in Mahim as well."

"But, Vidya, I have to return today. If I don't, they'll be worried sick."

Once again everybody fell silent. After a while, Vidyacharan's father said, "Anwar, son, listen to me and stay here today. You can go back tomorrow after the work. It's possible that the situation will have become normal by tomorrow. Call Bahu and let her know that you'll be staying here tonight."

“But, Uncle, if I start right away, I can make it to Pune by evening. If the situation doesn’t improve by tomorrow ...”

Just then a police siren blared outside. The police van was announcing the curfew.

“There, they’ve imposed the curfew. Didn’t I say that they would, pretty soon?” Shyam said, suppressing his excitement. Then he got up, walked over to the window, and peered outside.

Vidya’s father chided him: “Shyam, shut the window and sit down quietly.” Then he ordered his elder son, “Vidya, see to it that the windows in all the rooms are securely shut.”

Vidya got up and started to close the windows like a dutiful son, while his mother, Sushma, and Arti stood quietly inside the inner room.

Vidya’s father got up and aimlessly started to pace. Shyam, somewhat miffed, went over to the sofa and plopped down on it. The room became dark with the closing of the windows. Vidya’s seven-year-old boy Pappu asked his grandmother, “Dadi, Dadi, what is a curfew?”

But nobody gave him a reply. In the semi-dark room they all looked like so many quiet, immobile shadows. The only movement came from Vidya’s father, who was still walking restlessly with his hands folded behind his back. He was bare-chested above the waist. The sacred thread hung over his shoulder. His head was clean-shaven except for a tuft of hair that hung over his back like a squirrel’s tail. He had *vibhuti* painted between his eyebrows, and he was clad in a white dhoti.

Anwar had often seen him in just this garb. In fact, he had seen him like this for many many years. A devout, religious man, he was nevertheless quite secular in his thinking. He was well read, not just in his own religion, but also in many others. Anwar respected him a lot, and the old man always treated Anwar with affection. Every time he met him, every time he spoke to him, he had the feeling of sitting in the shade of some ancient *peepul* tree and listening to an old, dread-locked Sadhu expound on the meaning of contemplative life.

Today, however, he appeared to be an altogether different man. A stranger, who never had anything to do with him at all, and not just the old man alone—even Vidya’s mother, Sushma, Arti, Vidya himself, and Shyam, seemed strangers.

Anwar felt he would suffocate. His throat went dry and he longed for water. But, at this moment, asking for water would have amounted to an admission of his weakness. So he satisfied himself by running his tongue over his parched lips.

The darkness intensified the heaviness inside the room. Why didn’t anyone turn on the light? Just then Vidyacharan, as if sensing his friend’s

wish in some occult way, got up and did just that. The moment the room lit up, a current of animation swept through it. Vidya's father resumed his place on the swing-seat, which began to sway gently like a houseboat. Shyam got up and turned on the TV. Pappu ran up to the rocking swing-seat and stood on it, clutching the bar for support. Sushma and Arti retreated to the inner room. Vidya's mother edged up to Anwar and said softly, "Son, think of this as your own house. And don't let yourself worry too much. Nobody's going to harm you here. Now get up and call Bahu. She must be out of her wits with worry. Give her a few words of assurance. Tomorrow, as soon as the situation improves, you can return."

He peered into the old lady's eyes: bonding and motherly affection was all he could see there. The unknown fear that had taken hold of his mind relaxed some, and the feeling of being in the midst of strangers that had tormented him a while ago slowly began to disappear. Fear had raised a wall of suspicion. As the fear itself lessened, the wall too crumbled away. He took out his handkerchief from his pocket, wiped the sweat off his forehead, got up and went over to the phone. Sure enough, it was Salma who answered. The moment she heard his voice, she was overcome with emotion, on the verge of tears. "How are you?" she inquired. "Vidyacharan Bhai called right after you left. Where are you calling from? Come home quickly, please. I feel terribly afraid." She said it all at one go, without seeming to take even a breath. Fighting back his own emotion, he tried to say in as normal a voice as he could possibly muster, "Don't worry, Salma. I'll be back tomorrow. I'm calling you from Vidyacharan's house. Ordinary skirmishes, that's all. Nothing big. It'll all return to normal by tomorrow."

"But why do you want to stay on overnight? Why not return this evening, if your work's finished?"

"That's just it. The work isn't finished. The office of the party we want to meet is closed today. I'll take care of the paperwork first thing tomorrow morning. I'll be back in Pune by the afternoon. Tell Mother not to worry. Vidyacharan is here with me. Kiss Sajid and Majid for me."

"Give your mother my *namaskar*," Vidya's mother instructed him in a loud voice.

"Aunt is sending Mother her greetings. I'll call you back again in the evening. And now I'll hang up. Khuda Hafiz!"

Salma, too, from the other end said in a drained voice, "Fi amani 'l-Lah!"

"It's good that you didn't tell Bhabhi about the curfew," Vidya said.

"All the same, she'll find out. Tomorrow. In the papers. She'll know everything. And she will feel miserable ..."

He wiped the sweat off his forehead once again and sat down on the

sofa. Then Vidyacharan grabbed his hand and brought him into the other room, with a bed, a couple of couches, a writing table and a few books. "This is my room," Vidyacharan said as he opened the window and slid the curtain to one side. "I had it built only recently. You can rest here."

He didn't reply.

"Pitaji worries too much. But really there's no need to close the window. You keep it open. Nothing will happen."

He peered down from the window. It opened onto the main street. But the street was completely deserted at the moment.

"The bathroom's over there. Take a shower if you like. You'll feel fresh. But just rest now. We'll meet again over tea at four o'clock."

He then stepped forward and put his hand on Anwar's shoulder. "Don't think that I don't know what you're going through. But don't you worry. Everything'll turn out OK. You'll get back to Pune in one piece—I promise."

He looked at Vidya with a withered smile and stretched out on the sofa. "I'm OK, Vidya. Don't worry about me."

"Just yell if you need anything." Vidyacharan left the room.

The evening news on TV showed a few glimpses of the riots in the city. The dreadful scenes left no doubt that rioting had spread through the entire city, and a curfew had been imposed in several areas. Towards the tail end of the news, the police commissioner was shown repeating the same asinine assurance: "But the situation is under control."

His restlessness grew worse. Even before the news had ended, he quickly got up and dialed his number at Pune, but couldn't get through. He tried again and again. Perhaps there was a problem with the line itself. A bit irritated, he returned to his seat.

"What happened?" Vidya's father asked.

"Looks like the line is out of order."

Later, Vidyacharan himself tried a few times but had no luck. They'd already had their supper and were now commenting on the news.

Vidya's father said: "What's gotten into people that they are slaughtering others just like them as though they were goats and sheep? I can't understand how a man can hate another so much."

"God knows where these riots will take the country," Vidyacharan wondered in a voice full of anxiety.

Vidya's mother joined both her hands against her forehead and said, "May Ishwar protect us all."

Suddenly they were all looking at him. He too wanted to say something, but just couldn't get it out. Not a single word. Thoughts were swirl-

ing in his mind like a whirlwind, but the corresponding words, before they so much as reached his tongue, perished like bubbles on the surface of water. The feeling that he had been caught in thorny bramble took hold of him. If he stirred even slightly, countless sharp needles would prick him all over his body. Never before had he felt himself so helpless. Just then Shyam got up, brought the carom board over, and said, “Anwar Bhai, how about a game or two?”

A sense of relief washed over him, as if somebody had pulled him from the water just as he was drowning. He agreed right away.

The board was laid out. Arti and Vidyacharan sat opposite each other as partners, with Shyam and he as partners against them. The game began.

The round black and white pieces were arranged in the circle in the middle of the board and were then struck with the striker, which scattered them all over the board. For a long time, the striker kept hitting the pieces, sending them into the corner pockets.

He was playing well enough, but his thoughts were elsewhere, as scenes of the rioting replayed in his mind—houses going up in flames, women running out screaming and crying, children weeping bitterly, old men stumbling along, young men brandishing swords and spears, and rising above them all the loud body-shaking cries of “Allahu Akbar!” and “Har-Har Mahadev!”

“What are you thinking about, Anwar Bhai?” Shyam alerted him. “Take the queen! It’s just within reach!”

“Where is it?” he asked, with a start.

The queen was within easy reach of him. He hit it with the striker. The piece banged against the edge and bounced back, fluttering on the board for a while before dropping dead.

Once, seven or eight years ago on Baqar Eid, he had sacrificed the goat with his own hands. But before the knife had completely slit the throat, the animal thrashed violently and got away from him, running to one side, blood gushing from the gaping wound. People ran after it and grabbed it. But he was unable to finish the job. Somebody else had to do it for him. Never again since that day was he able to slaughter an animal for sacrifice. Looking at the queen, now, as it writhed on the board, he suddenly recalled that goat with its throat only half-slit.

“Come on, Anwar Bhai, what’s this? You could’ve pocketed the piece so easily,” Shyam said, showing his regret.

“I’m sorry, Shyam. I’m just tired.” He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes.

“Shyam, you play with Arti. Let Anwar rest.” Vidyacharan then grabbed Anwar’s hand and made him get up.

“Let’s try to call again,” Anwar said.

“Yes, sure.” Vidya dialed the number. He dialed again. And again. He shook his head in disappointment and said, “I don’t think it’ll work. Looks like the line’s dead.”

He quietly went into the other room and lay down on the bed face down. His heart was sinking. If only he had gotten some news of Salma and the children, perhaps it would have helped ease his worry. The thought of his helplessness hit him hard. He felt like breaking down in tears, crying his heart out. But even crying wasn’t easy. What will these people think—people who were doing their best to comfort him? If he cried, not only would he humiliate himself, but he’d also hurt their confidence. Perhaps the limit of helplessness is the inability to cry when tears alone might help. Just then he heard a click and the light was turned off in his room. He turned over with a start.

“Nothing! It’s just me. Go to sleep!” Vidyacharan said, closing the door gently behind him on his way out.

After his departure a deathly stillness swept over the room. Not even the sound of a dog barking somewhere. Perhaps even the dogs had withdrawn to their shelters, cringing with fear. Only the sound of some policeman’s whistle rose now and then, or that of a siren. Meanwhile, he fell asleep.

God knows what hour of the night it was when a sound woke him up. The same darkness and stillness was around him once again. But no, small cracks had begun to appear in the wall of silence. He heard the muffled screams of hundreds, no, thousands of people coming from afar. He got up from the bed, quietly opened the window and peered out. The street lay just as quiet and deserted as it had been earlier during the day. But he did see what he thought was smoke rising somewhere far on the western horizon. The sky, too, looked reddish. Perhaps there had been an immense conflagration there. The noise too seemed to be coming from there. Just then he heard the rumble of a truck on the street. It too was coming from the same direction. He couldn’t see clearly because of the darkness, but he did see that several people sat huddled inside the truck, with weapons flashing in the hands of at least a few of them. A tremor shot through his entire body. Just then he heard a faint clatter outside his room, which set his heart pounding. An unknown fear reared up in his mind like the hood of a cobra. God knew what was about to happen! Could it be that the neighbors had found out that Vidya’s family was harboring an enemy, and so now were insisting, even this late at night, that they hand him over to them? He imagined himself being dragged out by a group of young men with saffron headbands. He would be gagged and, try hard as he might, just wouldn’t be able to get a sound out. He groped

for the light switch and turned it on. The room brightened. Shortly thereafter the door opened and Vidyacharan entered.

“You turned on the light—what’s the matter?”

“Nothing. I just woke up suddenly.”

Vidyacharan stared and then said as he sat down on the sofa, “I peeked in earlier, but you were sleeping.”

“How come you aren’t in bed?”

“I can’t fall asleep.”

“How come?”

“I keep thinking that you don’t feel safe here.”

“No, it isn’t like that at all. You wouldn’t let me be harmed in any way—I know that, Vidya. But given the conditions, it’s hard not to feel at least a little bit alarmed.”

“I understand. But remember this: no matter how volatile it may be all around, all it’ll take is a phone call, and a whole battalion of policemen will show up. The Police Commissioner is my friend. If you’d like to talk to him, I can arrange that right away.”

“No, no. There’s no need. Vidya, please don’t misunderstand me. I trust you completely.”

After a brief silence, Vidya abruptly asked, “Want some coffee?”

“I suppose I could use a cup.”

“Wait. I’ll go and fix some.”

The entire household came together again in the morning at breakfast. The situation outside remained unchanged. The curfew, though, was lifted for two hours. It was back in effect at ten o’clock.

Vidya called the railway station, police station, S.T. bus depot, Ashiyad bus terminal, taxi-stand—just about everywhere to get some idea of the situation. Everywhere he got the same answer: “The situation doesn’t look good. Better not travel.”

The telephone line to Pune was still dead. Inquiries were made at the telephone exchange, but no satisfactory explanation was offered. His anxiety was growing worse by the minute. But deftly hiding what was eating away at him inside, he kept talking to Vidya, his father, his mother, Shyam, and Arti as normally as he possibly could. He had Pappu recite two poems for him, and told him the story of the triple-horned demon, in which the prince hacks off each of the three horns one after another with his sword. Pappu was extremely pleased. He clapped and laughed for a long time. For his own part, though, he wondered: how could a six-foot-tall prince possibly exterminate a giant six times his size? But children are so gullible. How

easily they believe everything in a story. It's only when they grow up that they sink into the quagmire of doubt, suspicion, skepticism, and lack of trust. Seeing Pappu clap so joyously, he remembered his sons Sajid and Majid. He quickly bent over Pappu and kissed him on the forehead. Once again he started to feel anxiety tug at his heart. He got up and returned to his room.

Standing at the window he gazed into the desolate street for the longest time. All looked clear in the direction where he had seen that terrible smoke rising last night. A few young men stood talking inside the compound wall of the building directly in front. A police van drove in, moving at a snail's pace, and slowly inched farther and farther away. Suddenly a noise erupted to his left. He poked his head out to see. A scrawny young man ran out of a narrow alley. His wrists were bound behind him and his clothes were on fire. "Help! Help!" he was shouting. "Water! Water!" Perhaps his clothes had been doused with kerosene, because the fire was spreading very fast. His screams prompted the windows of the buildings around to open one by one. A few people craned their necks to look at him. The emaciated young man was jerking his head, all the while screaming for help. "Untie my hands! What will you get by killing me? Water! ... Water!"

He ran toward the compound where the group of young men stood talking. But the moment he came near the gate, they quickly closed it. The man kept begging them for water. But they turned around and went inside the building.

By now the flames had completely enveloped the youth, who looked like a single flame in motion. Running, he fell, and started to roll in the middle of the street, still screaming in sheer torment.

The tied hands finally broke free. All at once, charged with a sudden surge of energy, he got up and started madly to tear off his burning clothes from his body. But once again he stumbled and fell down, and began to writhe and thrash on the ground. His screams subsided into moans, his convulsions getting progressively weaker. His clothes had turned to ashes that stuck to his body, which had itself become as charred as a piece of charcoal. His moans too died down.

Only one or another part of his body twitched as the fire began to die down.

He gazed into the scene like it was a frightening nightmare, his hands clutching the frame of the window. His temples pounded as though he had been stuffed into the belly of an endlessly beaten kettledrum. He was

shaking ... slowly.

Down below, the body of the youth had by now become completely charred. The fire too had died, giving off a few stray curls of smoke. Just then a police siren blared. People peering out quickly shut their windows, though some left just a crack from which to peek. He too backed up, closed the window with his tremulous hands, and looked out through the chink. The police van stopped a little ways from the charred body. Four or five constables got down from the van, and the inspector from the front seat. The inspector walked over to the body with perfect composure. He had covered his mouth and nose with his handkerchief. The constables too held their noses between their thumbs and index fingers and followed him. They stood around the body. The corpse was now naked and had been rendered grotesque by the fire. The inspector said something, and one of the constables, still holding his nose, bent over and poked the corpse with his long stick. Then, shaking his head "No," he stood up straight. The inspector lifted his head and gave a sweeping look at the neighboring buildings. Heads peering from behind the slim openings in the windows instantaneously withdrew like turtles.

The inspector thundered: "Who burnt him? Tell me, who burnt him? Answer me!"

The openings in the windows further narrowed. Waving his stick the inspector walked to the corner of the alley on the left, peered into it, and then walked back to the corpse. Once again he raised his head to the windows and yelled, "At least throw down a cloth to cover the body. Have you lost all sense of humanity?"

A painful silence swept over the scene for a while. Then a window on the first floor of the building in front opened and an old man, leaning half-way out, tossed a white bed sheet down to the street. Then another window opened. A woman poked her head out and she too threw a folded white bed sheet down to the street. And then another window opened, and then another. Seven sparkling white bed sheets were tossed out within a few minutes. The inspector shouted, "That's enough charity! Now stop it!"

Two constables stepped forward. Picking up one of the sheets, they unfolded it and spread it out over the corpse.

Anwar closed his window and sat down on the bed. Suddenly he felt the whirlwind of dread starting to subside in his mind, replaced by a terrible emptiness. Astonishingly, all at once, he had risen above every fear, every apprehension. □

—Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon