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“Joota”¹

Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi
Introduced and translated by
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Introduction:

Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi was born on 20th November 1916, to an Awan family,² in a village called Angah in the Khushab district of Punjab, Pakistan. Referred to as a “mentor and guru” by Gulzar (the prominent Indian Urdu poet, screenwriter, film director), there is much within Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi’s work to appreciate. Like most great writers, Qasmi had an ear for dialogue. For instance, in the *afsana* ‘Joota,’ the dialogue between Karmo Mirasi, and Chaudhry has a dialectic that is reflective not just of the power dynamic that existed between them but also the power dynamic that was shifting where Karmo Mirasi was gradually moving up from his previous social class. Not only this, Qasmi manages to keep the dialogue both realistic and entertaining. The realism comes from the fact that Karmo consistently keeps referring to the events that he has experienced, particularly the fact that he has taken a number of shoe-beatings from Chaudhry’s goons. Qasmi creates a character who is quite composite: he has the humility of the social class to which he previously belonged, as well as a certain innocence and dedication with which he ensures his children receive education. However, he still has his

¹ Translated from the original Urdu short story “Joota” written by Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi from his short story collection, *Neela Pathar* (1980)

² Khadim Rizvi, former head of Tehreek-e-Labaik, Pakistan; the actor Yusuf Khan alias Dilip Kumar and the chess-player Mir Sultan Khan belong to the same tribe.

grievances against Chaudhry and a kind of Iago-like slyness with which he deals with Chaudhry’s attempts to berate him. In short, he seems to be a truly multi-dimensional character, capable of having two to three contrasting thoughts at various points in time, that still, nonetheless, possesses a linear progression that is easy to trace and follow in the plot of the story. And this is where Qasmi’s genius lies – his ability to create a multidimensional character with contrasting thoughts and feelings. One must also appreciate Qasmi’s nuanced language. This is especially apparent when he has Karmo resist making a mockery of his son’s name, Sarfaraz, into Sarfa, despite Chaudhry’s attempts to make him do so. Even the constant repetition of “*Iqbal Qaim*” or “May You Continue to Prosper” by Karmo takes on different meanings as the story develops, till it becomes a phrase with which Karmo is slyly mocking Chaudhry by reinforcing the idea that now the phrase is meaningless and hollow. With this hollowness, he pecks at Chaudhry’s ego, reminding him again and again of how Karmo is his equal, or, at least, does not need to worship the ground beneath Chaudhry’s feet like the rest of the villagers.

Qasmi remained in Punjab most of his life. However, he moved from Angah to Attock (then Campbellpur) for his high school, and then to Bahawalpur, where he studied at the famous Government Sadiq Egerton College. Thereafter, he graduated from the University of Punjab, Lahore, in 1935. Having spent a large part of his life in Punjab, and having observed the problems faced by the peasantry when they encountered the power structures of religious leaders (pirs) and landlords (similar to Chaudhry in ‘Joota’) Qasmi’s writings were informed by an element of realism that sensitively brought out the inmost sensibilities of belonging to marginalized or deprived communities. In a way, Qasmi’s writings can be seen as his attempt to go back to his village, where his “humanism” has its roots. “Joota” with its village setting and rural lifestyle, can be seen as a fine example of this humanism.

Apart from fiction, Qasmi was a noted poet, journalist, and political activist. He was also fiercely dedicated to mentoring younger writers including, Amjad Islam Amjad, Ata-ul Haq Qasmi, Khadija Mastur, Hajra Masroor and Parveen Shakir, who dedicated her bestseller ‘Khushboo’ to him. He also served as an editor of *Imroze* before Progressive Papers Limited was taken over by General Ayub Khan in 1959, and contributed frequently to the Urdu daily, *Jang*. Interestingly, his last column for *Jang* in 2006 argued that “the Constitution of 1973 was a consensus document and should not have been amended time and again” (Rumi 2006). His

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opposition to Ayub Khan’s military regime landed him in jail for four months, and then, when he was selected as the Secretary General of the Punjab wing of the Progressive Writers Association (a position he held for six years) he found himself detained for six months due to the group’s link with the 1951 Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case. Later on, his excellent literary merit worthy of the recognition, notwithstanding, his distancing himself from political associations. This might explain the Pride of Pakistan Award and the *Sitara-i-Imtiaz* with which he was later recognized.

At times, Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi found himself in awkward positions with his peers. Professor Fateh Muhammad Malik’s book, *Nadīm Shanāsī* highlights the differences between Dr Wazir Agha and Qasmi, as well as the jealousy or rivalry between Qasmi and Faiz. An interesting point to note is that Qasmi composed religious poetry (*nāts*) which he published in his famous literary journal, *Funoon*. This naturally led to criticism in Marxist and secular circles. Qasmi pointed out that Faiz also wrote religious poetry in an article titled, “*N’at nigārī aur taraqqī pasandī*” (*nāt* compositions and progressivism) to showcase that one can be “progressive” (often read as a euphemism for atheism/agnosticism/ secularism in Pakistan) even while composing religious poetry.

Qasmi was a talented writer, and translating him is a delight for any translator, since every *afsana* of his possesses a seeming simplicity, the complexities of which become apparent only on a closer, second or third reading. Qasmi’s translator is obliged to note and respond likewise to these complexities.

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The Shoe

Karmo clapped his hands for decades, as a member of a qawwal party, slaving away – then he also learned how to sing in a melodious voice. He moved from the back row to the front, sitting knee to knee with the head of the qawwal party. That’s when it occurred to the head of the

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qawwal party that Karmo might just usurp his position, and so he decided to give Karmo the boot. Karmo’s voice was not exactly the most mellifluous, but nonetheless he had learned the tricks of the trade and knew how to blend his voice into the din and drone of the harmonium. He formed his own qawwal party and went about singing during marriages, festivals, and religious gatherings whilst simultaneously ensuring that his three children went to school. The fact of the matter is, that working with the head of the qawwal party had given Karmo the opportunity to travel to the big cities of the country and he had realized that if he did not educate his children, they, like him and his father and his forefathers, would end up beating drums or sitting behind a qawwal, clapping away and would, like him and his father and his forefathers, also always, have their lips perpetually stretched in appeasing smiles.

When he had his three children enrolled in the village school, a stunned silence had descended over the entire village. Then, people began to jeer at him: “From Adam’s descent on this earth till date, this is the first time we’ve known of a *mirasi* who has the audacity to send his children to school.”

Chaudhry called him to his den and scolded him: “Shame on you, Karmo. You’re educating your children, despite being a *mirasi*. Will they quote lessons from books to people at weddings instead of drumming and singing? Why are you spoiling them so? Why are you spelling ruin on the profession of your community?”

Karmo heard all this patiently and remained silent. But he also kept smirking. When Chaudhry finally scolded him and insisted that he say at least something, he only said: “May You Continue to Prosper. He who eats plain *daal* and *saag* all his life, wishes, at times, to taste chicken and quail too.”

Karmo, pretending that it was the art of qawwali, screamed and hollered away to earn money and kept educating his children, so that when they came to the village during their summer vacations, they didn’t look like the children of a *mirasi* at all! And who knows what magic script they read because they weren’t embarrassed being the sons of a *mirasi* either! They’d say: “Okay, so what if we are the sons of Karmo *mirasi*; just like Chaudhry’s, our lineage too dates back to Hazrat Adam’s.”

These boys began working in mills located in Lahore, Kala Shah Kaku, and Faisalabad, and at the end of each month they sent so much

money to Karmo that that dissolved his qawwal party, began to live in a home he built to his liking, wore neat and clean clothes, gave charity, and one year he even gave *zakāt*. When Chaudhry heard this, he laughed so much that tears rolled down his cheeks. “That bastard,” he said, “that audacious lout! Wait and watch, in a year or two, he will be out begging for *zakāt* – if the Day of Judgment doesn’t precede that! If a *mirasi* gives out *zakāt*, take it as a sign that the sun is only a little over a span’s distance away.” And then Chaudhry began laughing again, as if he would cry.

Someone informed Karmo what Chaudhry had said, and he replied: “Why is he getting so annoyed? I haven’t given *zakat* to him; I could give it to him too, but he’s not eligible to receive any yet. But, slowly, he will . . . times are changing very fast.”

The ones who told Karmo what Chaudhry had said, believed that it mandatory to tell Chaudhry what Karmo had said. Chaudhry was drinking some *sharbat*. When he heard what Karmo had said, he choked hard on it, and it soon began to flow out of his nostrils.

Another time, Karmo was sitting by his street, chatting with some people. And he began saying: “Bhai, I am a *mirasi*, but I am also the father of three proper *babu* folk, which is why I want to set up a proper place for us to meet, instead of sitting here right on the street. I’ll have beddings and mattresses laid out for us to sit upon them and then we can talk about anything and everything under the sun – all the good-good, the beautiful-beautiful, and the sweet-sweet things. Of course, there is Chaudhry’s den as well, but while I’m there, I feel I am standing on my head.”

Having said so, he went home. He refilled his hookah, and had only lit the *chillum* and lain upon his reed cot to draw the first puff, when there came a summons from Chaudhry. He had only set foot in the den when three to four goons caught hold of him and threw him to the ground and Chaudhry’s personal *munshi* began to beat him mercilessly upon his back with shoes. Meanwhile, Chaudhry kept swearing at him: “You’ll make a sitting place, you lout, will you? A den like mine? Just look at you! Only four *paisa* have floated your way and you have forgotten your standing, you bastard! Go on, beat him a little more!”

Karmo was struck so many times with the shoes, that had it been someone else he would have easily lost count. However, Karmo counted each and every strike. “I kept counting,” he said to the ones who met him

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after that. “I kept counting so that when I reckon with Allah on the Day of Judgement for recompense on this matter of the shoes, I should make no mistake. Sixty-two times I was struck. God willing, I will take full recompense for those sixty-two strikes! Seventy for one, as Allah has promised! Even if I don’t get that seventy for one, it’s alright. For Chaudhry, one shoe of mine, in front of all of God’s creatures in the universe, is more than enough.”

In those days, voters were being registered. The registrars came to this village too and were registering Karmo’s name. Then, one of them said: “Bhai, you tell us that your name is Karma. What sort of name is Karma! It could be Karam Elahi or Karam Ali or Karam Deen. Karma is not a name. This seems to be a distortion of your real name.”

Karmo replied: “I am a *mirasi*, ji, and these are the kinds of names we *mirasis* have. The actual distortion of my name is Karmo, while my name is actually Karma, in the same way my father’s name Gamma, was distorted to Gammo.”

Exasperated, they noted on the list: “Karma: son of Gamma; Race: *Mirasi*; Profession: Donkey-cart puller.” At these words, Karmo lost his temper: “No, *sahibs*, I am not a puller of donkey-carts! Even one *paisa* earned from a donkey’s toil is *harām* to me! All my life, I have eaten the earnings of my hard work! The fact that my children are educated is also a blessing I have earned due to my hard work. Now they work hard, and pay me back for all my efforts! I even give *zakāt* now! Then how can I be a puller of donkey-carts? If it is so easy to be designated as a person who earns from the toil of others, then note down Chaudhry’s name as one among them, for the peasant toils while Chaudhry eats of those toils!”

Chaudhry soon got the news that Karmo had called him a donkey-cart puller in front of the registrars. He was summoned at once to Chaudhry’s den and in front of the entire village, the munshi beat him up with shoes once again. The beating was going on, when suddenly Karmo stood up and held fast on to the *munshi*’s wrist, declaring: “Stop, you have struck me sixty-two times. I have received my quota. If you hit me more than this, then on the Day of Judgement Chaudhry will suffer beyond what he can bear.”

“I will suffer?” Chaudhry was so startled; it seemed the sun had fallen on his head. “How will I suffer, you lot?”

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The expression in Karmo’s eyes was quite different now. He replied: “Well, if you won’t suffer, definitely the angel in charge of your reckoning, will.”

“My reckoning?” Chaudhry changed his position. It seemed he would stand up on the cot. “What are you blubbering? What do you mean by my reckoning?”

“Ji, that of having the poor beaten up with shoes. Seventy for one,” replied Karmo, without waiting for more shoes to strike him. Then he stood up, and picking up his turban from the floor, he continued as he dusted it: “Now you do the math yourself, May You Continue to Prosper. Sixty-two these, and sixty-two earlier ones, which, combined together, God bless your fortunes, is one hundred and twenty-four. On the Day of Judgement, if for one you get seventy, then imagine how much you’d get for one hundred and twenty-four. O munshi ji, do the math, and let Chaudhry know!”

Angrily, Chaudhry stretched out his hand and reached for his shoe but when he noticed that all the people gathered in his den were smiling appreciatively at the things Karmo had just said, he instead, reached out for a splinter on the floor and crushed it so hard in his fist that it turned to powder. Swear-words rested just on the edge of his lips.

The birds were flying back to their nests. Nightfall was drawing near.

After that incident, Chaudhry became careful about how he spoke with Karmo. Karmo may have been a *mirasi*, but he was a *mirasi* who ate and lived well, and people who eat and live well, talk to other people who eat and live well with a lot of forethought, the way the United States engages with Russia and vice-versa. However, once people who were of no consequence had left his den, and only the ones who were truly close to Chaudhry remained, he would give free rein to the babblings inside of his envious heart. “This lout spits foul-tasting medicine. Doesn’t matter. Now I’ll administer sugar-coated pills to him!” Then he would busy himself with musings on the times. “People say inebriation brought on by alcohol is bad; I say that the inebriation money brings upon the *nouveauriche* is even worse. Look at Karmo. There was a time when every time this *mirasi* would meet me, he would start exclaiming: ‘May You Continue to Prosper, May You Continue to Prosper’ and prostrate before me . . . and now, this! Only the other day, he said to me: ‘I’m going to

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Lahore and Faisalabad. If you need something, let me know: a walking stick, maybe, or a shoe, or anything!’ This all is the inebriation brought on by money.” Then Chaudhry stretched his neck as far as he could, looked hither and thither and continued: “Maybe he is hiding in some nearby nook or cranny, the bastard. Do you recall when, right here in this den, I was talking about him and because of the darkness I did not notice that the lout was sitting right her, close to me? I was talking about his disgraceful ancestors and his new-found audaciousness, and I also said that if a crow wears the feathers of a peacock, it will still remain a crow. At that, he, this man who once refilled my *chillum*, who cleaned my horse stables, said with such self-assurance: “You know, Chaudhry ji, I’ve heard from the wise, that the crow is also of the same lineage as the peacock; it has just grown colourful feathers and learned how to dance!” Do you remember? *Money* has bolstered the confidence of this disciple of Plato! There was a time when he would crawl about my legs like a kitten, meowing away! Money has sharpened his tongue and made it long enough to hang till my shoes. But I know the tricks that keep the nouveau-riche in check. Never mind the embroidery on the shoe: it is a shoe nonetheless, worn on the foot. If this son of a *mirasi* wishes to live in my village, he’ll have to live like a *mirasi*. Just wait and watch!”

It was Winter. Having spent a few days with his sons, Karmo had only just returned to the village, wearing a golden shawl. People would run their hands over it and declare in utter amazement: “How could the fur of a bear be so soft!” When one of Karmo’s relatives felt the shawl, he recited “*Bismillah*,” and put a corner of the shawl in their mouth and exclaimed: “Oh, this is as soft as *suji halwa*! Whenever you want, wrap it around yourself. Whenever you want, you can eat it.”

Karmo went around telling everyone he met, that the shawl cost one hundred rupees. “And it’s not just beautiful. It’s also very warm. Even if it were snowing outside, inside it, it seems there’s a barbecue grill ablaze! In fact, even in the bitterest cold, I start sweating – I can swear by the five holiest figures of Islam!”

Everyone in the entire village, was talking about the shawl. The news reached Chaudhry too, but altered in a manner that implied that Karmo had said: “Even Chaudhry couldn’t get his hands on a shawl like this!” Chaudhry smiled at this bit of news as though someone had pierced a knife into the side of a melon. Karmo’s newfound money had converted Chaudhry into a cunning politician.

One day, Karmo, the golden shawl wrapped around him, passed by the street where Chaudhry had his den. He was sitting outside with his goons, taking in the sun. He had Karmo summoned and ran his hand over Karmo’s shawl. “From where did you nick this?”

Karmo sat down on a nearby bench. “I have never, may you continue to prosper, ever stolen a chick, how can I steal a shawl? And never, ever, a shawl like this one. It made the hair on the nape of your neck stand on edge when you touched it. Didn’t it?”

Chaudhry’s expression changed into that of a man caught on the prowl. Slicing the melon yet again, Chaudhry questioned: “Alright, if you haven’t nicked it, from where did you get it?”

Karmo let a moment pass before replying. His eyes glittered. At the mention of his sons, it was almost as if the oil-lamps placed inside his pupils had been lit. “You know my son Sarfaraz, in Kala Shah Kaku . . .”

“Oh, yes, *Sarfa!*” Chaudhry corrected Karmo.

“Yes,” replied Karmo without paying attention to the correction of his error. “That Sarfaraz began to say: ‘Papa, why don’t you take home a good pair of shoes from here?’ I said: ‘Son, there are a lot of shoes back home in the village. Why don’t you get me something else instead? Something like a gift?’ So, he brought me this shawl. The father of a friend of his lives in Malaysia. He brought the shawl for his son from there and Sarfaraz bought it from him for his dear papa.”

Chaudhry replied: “Look, Karmo, what if I were to say I want this shawl? What then?”

“Then take it. May you continue to prosper.” Karmo replied in thunderous tones. “If Sarfaraz asks where it went, I’ll tell him the robbers stole it.”

Chaudhry tried dismissing this with a forced cackle of laughter but it was clearly evident his laugh was hollow and did not emerge from his lungs as it otherwise would. And then he suddenly became serious and asked: “How much will you take for this?”

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“Nothing. May you continue to prosper.” Karmo’s voice was calm and relaxed.

“But I won’t take it for free.” Chaudhry said. “This is our ancestral trait – we give for free, but we never take for free. You know that. You have lifelong experience.”

“Yes” replied Karmo, “but sometimes, a moment comes when even the ones who take, become the ones who give. May you continue to prosper. Take it, please. Sarfaraz will send me another one.”

“No, Karmo,” replied Chaudhry. “You are our mirasi. Your father and your forefathers both have cleaned the shoes of our elders. Beg what you will beg for this shawl. I’m sure Sarfay told you how much he paid for the shawl.”

“Yes, Sarfaraz did tell me how much the shawl cost.” Karmo sounded as if he were lost in planning some deep scheme. Then, as if he had arrived at some agreeable conclusion, he began smiling. “The shawl is from another country, you see. I told Sarfaraz not to squander money on pointless purchases like these. But he said nothing is expensive, if it’s bringing our father comfort. . . You are right. Education has spoilt them. May you continue to prosper. The price is a bit much.”

“You mean to say, it’s so much that Sarfa, the *mirasi* can pay the price but not I?” Despite trying hard to keep his temper, Chaudhry, remained unsuccessful. “Tell me, how much did you get it for? Fifty? Hundred? Two hundred? Three hundred? How much?”

“Well, not three hundred, definitely.” Karmo said, looking at the munshi in the way the munshi would look at Karmo before administering his beatings. “It cost exactly two hundred and sixty-two.” Saying so, he cast a penetrative gaze at everyone gathered.

“And your son paid that much?”

“He earns well. May you continue to prosper.”

“So you will take two hundred and sixty-two rupees from me?”

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“You can leave out the sixty-two. I’m sure that will be reckoned for later. The rest you can give.”

“Why don’t I add another sixty-two in that two hundred and sixty-two?” Chaudhry said, victoriously. “After all, you are our *mirasi*.”

“Well, you may give me more. May you continue to prosper. How about three hundred and twenty-four?”

“Well, you’ve also learnt to negotiate just like shopkeepers!” Chaudhry said, jestingly.

And Karmo, taking off the shawl, said: “I spend money now without keeping track of it. May you continue to prosper. If I know anything, it’s only how to keep track of sixty-two.”

Chaudhry shook off the sting of Karmo’s strategic trap and said to his munshi, “Well, man, give him his three hundred and twenty-four.”

“Rupees, Munshi ji. Three hundred and twenty-four rupees!” Karmo advised the munshi, stressing upon the rupees.

“What else will I give, if not rupees? Surely, I cannot give *paisas*!” the munshi reacted, reaching for the inner pocket of the waistcoat he was wearing under his kameez, and taking out a wad of currency notes.

“I thought I’d tell you it is three hundred and twenty-four rupees so that you don’t end up giving me three hundred and twenty-four shoe beatings instead.”

Everyone, including Chaudhry, burst out laughing, but the reason for everyone’s laughter was individually discernible. Chaudhry laughed as if his chest were made of a sheet of tin against which everyone was casting pebbles.

Karmo took the money and walked off smiling.

Then Chaudhry had the shawl spread out before him and smiled. He had it dusted as if trying to have the *mirasi*-ness inside of it shaken off. He had it folded and handed it to the munshi who would take it to Chaudhry’s house. “Tell them to keep it in the sun for an entire day and

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then throw it in some trunk.” And then he addressed the crowd in his den.
“I have dozens of such shawls. But I cannot see a *mirasi* worth only two
paisa adorn himself in a shawl that costs three hundred and fifty rupees.
A shoe should always remain under one’s foot.”