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“Sarasvatī Asnān”¹

Ghazanfar

Introduced & translated by

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Abstract. Ghazanfar is a renowned Urdu fiction writer, poet and literary critic whose works revolve around the dynamics of society, its intricacies and the underlying problems. Through his writings, he familiarises the readers to often overlooked realities of life. Sarasvatī Asnān is a short story that also brings to the readers a slice of life that seems fresh but is indeed a glimpse into the world that exists within the folds of life. Through the meeting of the protagonist, Raghav and the boatman, the writer delves into the intricacies of life and sheds light on the constraints of the material world that man is trapped in. The encounter becomes a window to reflect on broader human experiences to reveal deeper truths of life and highlight selflessness and sensitivity in a profound manner. The confluence of the three rivers – the Ganges, the Yamuna and the Sarasvati becomes symbolic of the convergence of diverse individuals, varied worlds and differing ideologies, all uniting at a shared juncture known as humanity.

Keywords. Societal Dynamics, Selflessness, Sensitivity, Human Experiences

Introduction

Professor Ghazanfar Ali, known by the pen name Ghazanfar, is a notable and prolific Urdu fiction writer, poet, literary critic and educationalist who has made significant contributions to Urdu literature and scholarship. He has also made significant contributions in the advancement of Urdu medium

¹ The translator has used the abridged version of the story presented by the author at a short story reading session at the Ved Vyasa Sabhagar, Sahitya Mahotsav, Literature festival organised by Sahitya Akademi (11-16 March, 2024).

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education.

Born on March 9, 1953, in Gopalganj, Bihar, Ghazanfar pursued his M.A. and Ph.D. in Urdu from Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh. He served as the Director of the Academy of Professional Development of Urdu Medium Teachers (APDUMT) at Jamia Millia Islamia University, New Delhi. In these capacities, he worked for the advancement of Urdu medium education and the development of Urdu language teachers.

Ghazanfar started his literary career with poetry before transitioning to short stories. Alongside, these he has authored several critical works. Novel writing came much later in his life and include works like *Pānī* (1989), *Divya bānī* (2000), *Kahānī Uncle* (1997), *Shorāb* (2009) and *Mānjhī* (2012). His novels explore complex human emotions and social themes. They reflect a thoughtfulness towards the contemporary world and thus resonate deeply with the readers. His short story collections include *Hairat Farosh* (2005) and *Parking Area* (2016). His short stories intricately weave the fabric of the society, addressing its conditions, the political scenario, issues within the system and the dynamics of authority. Through nuanced narratives, these stories offer readers a reflective lens to ponder over the complexities of contemporary life.

Ghazanfar has worked as the editor and chief editor of the “Urdu Style Manual” published by the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL), Mysore, by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India. Additionally, he also served as the editor of “*Tadrīs Nāma*,” an educational journal of APDUMT at Jamia Millia Islamia. His editorial contributions to various journals have helped promote Urdu language education and its discourse.

Ghazanfar’s profound impact on literature and education has garnered widespread acclaim and recognition. His dedication and talent were honoured with the prestigious “National Iqbal Samman” by the Government of Madhya Pradesh in 2018 which serves as a testament to his significant contribution. In 2016, the Urdu Akademi of Uttar Pradesh and later the Bihar Urdu Akademi in 2020 bestowed upon him accolades for his lifetime achievements, highlighting his enduring influence in the literary world. Furthermore, his literary skills were celebrated with the Shamim Nikhat Fiction Award in 2023 in Lucknow, underscoring his ongoing commitment to excellence in storytelling.

Ghazanfar has been on various prestigious committees and advisory boards. He served as a member of the Janpith Award Committee, one of the highest literary honours in India from 2011 to 2014, and was a member of the Departmental Advisory Board of the Department of Language (DEL) at NCERT, New Delhi where he contributed to shaping language education policies. He also served twice as a jury member for the Iqbal Samman, awarded by the Government of Madhya Pradesh. His dedication and contribution to Urdu literature is noteworthy for the language lovers. His continues to inspire and influence future generations of writers and educators. His dedication to the

Urdu language and its literature has left an indelible mark on both academic and literary circles.

Sarasvatī Asnān begins with the protagonist Raghav meeting the boatman, an enigmatic personality epitomising wisdom and experience. The story explores the meeting between the two and centres around their conversations that bring about discussions on human beings and the realities of life. The narrative explores themes of selflessness and relationships and interdependence of human beings and the natural world. The story is set against the backdrop of the confluence of the Yamuna, the Ganges and the Sarasvati. The setting of the story is significant as it coincides with the meeting of two different worlds and the perspectives of the boatman and Raghav. Raghav is fascinated by the boatman's viewpoints on life and the world around them as they set out on a ferry voyage together. The story is narrated through detailed descriptions of the surrounding area, including the rivers and the swarms of birds that fly around the ferry. The boatman has a philosophical bent of mind that encompasses the truths of life and human existence. Through his conversation with him, Raghav gains a new perspective of the world and a greater understanding of the interdependence of man and nature.

The boatman intrigues Raghav with his engaging style of speech as well as his knowledge and keen observations. It also helps him get a better understanding of both the outside world and himself. Through the journey, they discuss a wide range of subjects, from nature to man to the material world. Raghav observes that the boatman has a spiritual connection with the rivers, and his relationship with them goes far beyond the understanding of any other common man. The reverence in which he holds the rivers is something that most passengers riding the boat while being caught up in their materialistic worlds fail to realise. Ali has introduced the migratory birds as metaphors that gives the story layers and deepens the idea of existence that the writer tends to incorporate. The birds here are not only present but are associated with the characters as they feed them with grains. However, the way these birds are treated by passengers varies as some of them do that as an act of faith while others do it for enjoyment. This sets up a contrast between the desires and ambitions one has for himself while being indifferent to the world around him. It also exposes the vices of society that include corruption of government in terms of setting up factories of grains or the boatmen selling the grain packets at higher prices.

By the end of the journey, and the story, Raghav's views have become influenced by the wisdom of the boatman. He has developed a newfound appreciation for the mysteries of life and nature. It appears as if he has begun to perceive life through a new or different lens, enriched by the boatman's wisdom, acquiring a better understanding of the world and developing reverence for the species around. His newfound outlook is more empathetic and selfless. The story compels the readers to reflect on their relationship with nature and the blessings of life. It makes them introspect and urges them

to inculcate within themselves the qualities of empathy and selflessness for a meaningful existence in the world.

“The Sarasvati Bath”

As Raghav arrived at the bank of the confluence of the rivers, a group of boatmen approached him.

“Fifty rupees a passenger. Five hundred for the whole boat.”

“Four hundred and fifty for the whole boat.”

“Four hundred only.”

The boatmen continued to call out their fares.

Turning to an elderly boatman who had remained silent till then, Raghav enquired: “You did not mention the cost of the ride...”

“One thousand.”

“Why such a big difference? Is your boat made of gold?”

“It is merely made of wood like those of the others, nor is it any different from the rest, but the distinction lies within me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I am more than just a boatman.”

“What are you, if not a boatman?”

“You will know when you take a ride on my boat.”

Raghav was impressed by the boatman’s confidence.

“It seems I will have to ride in your ferry.”

“Your style seems to suggest that you will ride only in my boat.”

“Are you confident?”

“I have developed the ability to sense a person’s intentions merely by looking at him owing to the time I have spent on the banks of this confluence of rivers; I have observed the body language and conduct of people around me.”

“You seem different. Where is your boat?”

“Why did not you ask me the reason for the high fare for a ride in my boat?”

“It did not seem necessary.”

“But I have a question for you.”

“Go ahead.”

“Are you from out of town?”

“Why do you ask? Do I seem like an outsider?”

“No, you don’t. But I have a feeling you are from another city.”

“How did you perceive that?”

“If you were someone from around here, you would have hesitated to agree to such a high fare for the ride, or would have, at least, done some haggling.”

“You are indeed different from the others.”

“Ready to move, sir?”

“Yes.”

Raghav accompanied him onto the boat, and the boatman took hold of the oars.

“Sir, we are on the Yamuna now. She is green in colour. Once, the green colour was so lush that it would spread greenery all around. It would not only bring more greenery to the earth but also the body and soul of human beings. Over time, darkness began to seep into it, fading the green colour. There are many stories about the mystery of this colour. According to some accounts, it is believed that the Yamuna River once transported an emerald from a mountain that gave Yamuna its green colour. Later on, the emerald mountain disappeared, and its remnants, buried within the Yamuna, turned to dust. The green colour which remains is attributed to remnants of emerald particles that endured through the continual deposition of silt and dirt. My uncle says the Yamuna’s foundation lies on the feathers of a giant parrot, much like the earth’s rests on horns of a cow. These green feathers were said to be the source of the Yamuna’s green colour and now that its colour has lightened, it is because some demons probably entered the water and started tearing the feathers of the parrot.”

Suddenly, a flock of birds started hovering over them.

Where have so many birds come from? Raghav asked, looking fixedly at the birds.

“Sahib, from another country. Hundreds of flocks like these keep hovering over us. They pounce upon a new boat just as they see it arriving.”

“They are beautiful – their black and white feathers are so attractive.”

“Sahib, they are endearing, but very hungry. If you throw them even a small amount of grain, they will swoop down upon it. Take this packet of grain and throw some into the river, and see how they dive for it.

Raghav took the packet from the boatman’s hand and tossed a handful into the water.

A flock of birds swept down at the speed of lightning.

“Sir, toss it in the air this time.”

“Why?”

“Go ahead, please.”

“Okay.” Raghav complied and tossed the grain in the air.

The birds adeptly caught each grain mid-air, without permitting a single

one to fall into the river. It seemed as though they had been trained in a zoo or a circus.

“What did you think of that?”

“Amazing!” Raghav threw a handful of grain into the air, again.

The birds continued somersaulting in the air. Their feathers fluttered and struck each other as they struggled to catch the grain. Some feathers even fell into the water.

Raghav threw more grain, and the birds began flipping again.

“Watching the birds swoop upon the grains brings me great satisfaction.”

“Satisfaction? Why?” Raghav asked, surprised.

“It reminds me that there are still many countries on this earth from where these hungry birds come to our nation in order to satisfy their hunger.”

Raghav’s expression changed suddenly; he stopped tossing grain into the air for the birds, his hands growing still.

It seemed as if the river was vanishing before his eyes, replaced by a long stretch of desert. Sand covered the ground, with grains scattered everywhere. Wheat complexioned people with dressed in white garments ran towards the scattered grain. Their throats were getting parched in the scorching sun, shining on the golden sand.

Gradually, the desert faded away, and before him lay a large expanse of snow. On the snow valley were scattered the grains, and here too, the wheat complexioned people dressed in white garments could be seen diving for the grain and falling down in their attempts to do so.

“Where has your mind wandered off, Sahib?” The boatman addressed Raghav.

Raghav remained silent.

“Sahib, what is the matter? Why did you stop talking so suddenly? If you have run out of grains, I can give you another packet.”

“No, not now.”

“Then why aren’t you moving your hand? Throw it for them.”

“I do not feel like it.”

“Sahib, can I ask you one thing?”

“Go ahead”.

“Did you not enjoy watching the birds get attracted to the grain and swoop down on the feed?”

“I did like it.”

“Did not you feel the urge to continue feeding them and keep enjoying the sight?”

“I did feel the urge. If the scene had not changed before my eyes, I might have asked for one or two more packets of grain.”

“Sahib, many passengers like to keep feeding the birds with dozens of packets until they are done with the boat ride. If they run out of packets, they buy some more from their boatman, who sells the packets at double or triple the original price. Sometimes, I am also tempted to take advantage of the situation, but my conscience does not permit me to do so. That is why I make a reasonable profit and did not ask you for any money. Even if you do not give me anything, I would not regret it”

“Why?”

“Because sometimes, I get the feeling that it is not right to take money from certain people”.

“Thank you.” Raghav’s gaze was fixed on the boatman. Not because he had won a place in his heart, but because he could see a certain radiance in his dust-coloured face that was equivalent to that on the face of ascetics.

“Everyone makes hay while the sun shines, so why not you? Passengers willingly pay high prices to boatmen; they are not forced to do so.”

“Coercion and force are not always superficial; sometimes they take place beneath the surface. If it is like a matter of striking the iron while it is hot, I do not feel like doing it.”

Raghav’s eyes sparkled with brightness at the sight of the boatman.

Suddenly, they heard the sound of something crashing and turned towards it. Another ferry was had approaching theirs. The passengers in the boat were throwing grain in all directions, and a large flock of birds was diving towards it. The sound they had heard was that of these birds colliding with one other.

“Doesn’t this struggle for food injure these birds?”

“Yes, Sahib. They do get injured. In fact, some of them even die.”

Raghav’s sadness deepened.

“Sahib, you are unlike the rest of the people?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, perhaps you are like me, very different from others. Shall I say one more thing?”

“Speak.”

“All the grain that is given out in abundance is not done out of genuine care for the hungry birds nor is it an act of faith.

“Then why do they give out so extravagantly?”

“Most of the passengers who feed the birds do not have an idea that these birds are hungry and have come from far off countries to satisfy their hunger and save their lives. Some people might do it for good will, but most of them do it for their own enjoyment. Moreover, it also benefits certain businesses.”

“Businesses? What businesses?”

“Many factories for the production of grain have been set up around here!”

“What?”

“Yes, Sahib. And this business not only benefits the factory owners but also the middle-men and the administration.”

Raghav’s gaze fixed on the packet of grain he held in the fingers of his left hand. The packet still had some grain left in it.

Suddenly, a clear plastic packet blew large like a balloon, and some factories from nearby places were erected within it.

“Even plots of land are being allotted at discounted prices for this business under the guise of bird welfare schemes.”

More factories set up within the balloon-like packet in front of Raghav’s eyes. Nearby, a flood also appeared, whose emergence was leading to the degradation of the dignity of people, as if children nestled in the lap of their parents were being auctioned off.

“Sahib, we are in the Ganga now.”

“What? Raghav shifted his gaze from the venomous water of the flood towards the flowing Ganga.

“Yes, Sahib. Our boat is gliding on the Ganges now.”

“Is she truly the Ganga?” Raghav asked, looking at the water with surprise.

“Yes, Sahib.”

“This is the same Ganga, the mother-river, known for its ability to cleanse impurities with its pure waters. Its sacred waters are believed to purify the soul.”

“Yes, Sahib. She is the same.”

“But her water is...”

“Sahib, imagine receiving all the filth from households and factories, combined with the bodies and souls of the departed. What would happen then?”

Raghav, who had kept a set of spare clothes in his handbag in case he took a dip in the Ganga, on his cousin’s advice, now hesitated as he observed the unclean waters of the river. He swiftly reconsidered his plans.

“Sahib, we have reached a point to which people travel from far off places, spending thousands of rupees, only to witness it. Its sight is believed to liberate one from the cycle of life and afterlife. Observe the confluence of these two rivers; from one side flows the Ganga and from the other, flows the Yamuna. Each has its own distinctive colour, and even when the two merge, the colours remain separate. This extraordinary union is known as “Sangam.””

Raghav was mesmerised at the sight of the rivers merging, a breath-taking display where each retained its distinctiveness while harmonizing seamlessly with the other.

It brought to his eyes another sight where various colours were blending together to create a rainbow.

“Isn’t this union amazing, Sahib?”

“Indeed, I wish it was...”

Raghav spoke the rest of the sentence softly to himself, apparently leaving the sentence incomplete, for the boatman, and suddenly threw another question at him.

“Is this known as the “Triveni”?”

“Yes, Sahib, it is also called Triveni which signifies the union of the Ganga, Yamuna, and Sarasvati.”

“Does the Sarasvati truly exist, or is her existence merely a myth?”

“The Sarasvati does exist, Sahib. Although everyone does not get a chance to see her.”

“Can you see her?”

“Yes, Sahib, I can see her.”

“Where do you see her?”

“Right here, beneath their convergence.”

“Can your vision penetrate deep into the water?”

“Surely, Sahib.”

“Okay.”

“You seem surprised, right? While I may not possess the competence to claim that I can see Sarasvati, the fact remains the same.”

“No, your words do not surprise me. I am surprised because, based on our conversations so far, I can vouch that you are not lying.”

“Thank you, Sahib. Thank you very much.”

“If you have seen the Sarasvati, please enlighten me about her.”

“What aspect are you interested in, Sahib?”

“Firstly, describe her colour.”

“It is very clear, like that of a mirror. Very bright.”

“Whose colour is her hue similar to – Ganga or Yamuna?”

“Different from both, Sahib.”

“She must have a distinctive colour then. I mean, just as the Ganga appears light green, while the Yamuna cloudy/soiled. How would you describe the Sarasvati’s colour?”

“Indeed, there is a colour, but it does not belong to any colour family – neither green, nor blue, nor yellow...”

“Then how would you describe it?”

“It is a strange colour. It combines elements of both the Ganga and the Yamuna, yet the Ganges’ colour is not green. It is a blend of all the hues of the sun, the moon, and the stars. Sahib, I cannot articulate the exact colour, but it is incredibly captivating and beautiful.”

Raghav continued to gaze at the boatman intently.

“From where does she originate? And where does she lead to?”

“Sahib, that cannot be deciphered.”

“Why is that?”

“Because her stream flows in all directions.”

“How is the current?”

“Neither too fast nor too slow. It is balanced.”

“Do the waves rise high?”

“Yes, quite high, yet they do not disperse.”

“How does it feel to look at the Sarasvati?”

“It is as if one is looking at molten silver with pearls and diamonds flowing within it. It brings a profound brightness to the eyes and a melody to the ears. It purifies the soul, and one feels the urge to dive into her and remain embraced in her arms forever.”

Raghav felt as though the boatman was speaking of a Goddess.

“Sahib, even if one cannot physically perceive the Sarasvati, she keeps doing her work from beneath.”

“She imparts her colour to others and leaves a lasting impression. It is because of her that some passengers even shed tears when they see the hungry birds. I pray to God that the Sarasvati never approaches the surface.”

“Why do you pray for such a thing?”

“Because I fear it, Sahib.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“What if she also...” He left the sentence incomplete.

“What also?”

“Do I need to explain this, Sahib?” The boatman looked at Raghav while his eyes seemed to be questioning him.

Raghav remained silent, neither speaking nor questioning.

“Sahib, if you wish to take a dip in the water, I can steer the boat closer to the confluence.”

“No, it is not necessary. I’ve already done so already.”

“Already taken a dip? Where? When?” The boatmen looked at him with surprise.

“In the Sarasvati.”

“In the Sarasvati? When did you reach there?”

“When you were talking about her virtues.”

“Did you see her...?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Sahib, I was quite certain you would get the opportunity to witness her. I even prayed for it, and she answered. All hail to the Sarasvati.”

He maneuvered the boat in such a way that it circled around the confluence.

“Shall we head back?”

“Sure.”

The boat began its return journey from the confluence towards the bank.

Once again, a flock of birds hovered above them.

“Should I give you another packet of grain?” The boatman asked Raghav.

“No, there’s still some left in this packet still.” Raghav took out the grain and scattered its contents into the Ganga.

However, the manner in which he scattered the grain to the birds was different from the way he had scattered it when they had approached the Yamuna.