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“Sāye”¹

Khalid Jawed

Introduced & translated by

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Introduction

Khalid Jawed (1960 –) is an Urdu writer. He taught at the Department of Urdu in Jamia Millia Islamia University, New Delhi. A writer and academic, he is known for his distinctive literary style and the depth of storytelling. His themes primarily revolve around existential crises, alienation, psychological trauma and emotional disorders. He has a keen understanding of contemporary critical theory, and experiments with genre and narrative. Several of his works have been translated into English. His novel *N'emat Khāna*, translated as *The Paradise of Food* (2022), was awarded the JCB prize for literature in the same year.

The story “Sāye” is unusual in many ways. It is not easy to categorize the story, as it incorporates elements of modernism, postmodernism, the supernatural, and the gothic. Yet there is a certain simplicity to the narrative as well. It does not evidently delve into the existential, and does not include forced complexities. Despite a straightforward narrative style, it grips the reader and leaves him or her wondering about its theme, plot, or even questioning the existence of a storyline. Instead of a relying on a single narrative it is propelled by multiple narratives and an incoherent plot that moves back and forth in time and space. The narrator of the story relies on his memory to narrate about a non-specific time of life, in which the month of Muharram (the first month of the Islamic calendar marked by mourning), plays an important role. But it is not merely a story about Muharram. The unnamed narrator recalls phases of his life, only to feel confused and unsure about them. He tries hard to remember Muharram and Baqrid during his childhood, but this memory gives no specific answers. At times, it seems

¹ Translated from “Sāye” (pp. 56-84) in *Tafrih kī ek Dopahar*, Scheherzade Publishers, 2008. (<https://rekhta.org/ebooks/tafreh-ki-ek-dopahar-khalid-javed-ebooks>)

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the narrator is suffering from depression, and he uses his memory to heal the trauma at the present moment. At other times, the narrative feels like a dream because it comprises fragments of the narrator's imagination. The lack of coherence makes it intriguing and challenging, even monotonous at times.

Included in the collection *Tafriḥ kī ek Dopahar* (a leisurely afternoon), the title makes the story sound sinister and suffused with mystery. The simplest things are complicated simply by means of language. It is the usage of language that makes the story what it is, and reveals how language shapes a narrative and broadens its horizons in terms of meaning and interpretation. The sentences are occasionally fragmented and at other times incoherent. They do not make sense unless read in the context of the entire narrative. An understanding of movements like modernism and postmodernism, which influenced the literature of the early twentieth century, helps better understanding.

“Sāye” is rooted in the Muslim cultural ethos. The caste system permeates the Muslims; apart from Baqrid and Muharram, there is nothing Islamic or religious about the story. It is an Indian story that depicts Muslim neighborhoods and the social structures that govern them. The women characters in the story play marginal roles. At times when the reader expects intimacy, the narrative takes a gothic turn. There are region-specific beliefs and superstitions, like musical instruments producing terrifying effects. The presence of supernatural elements is subtle but ubiquitous. Any reader, irrespective of background, can easily sense eeriness. Child and adult perspectives are blurred. As an adult who is recalling his childhood, the narrator at times mixes his current state of mind with his memories of the past. This could be equated with the stream-of-consciousness technique, a hallmark of modernism, making the narrative even more challenging to categorize and comprehend.

Given the complexity and scope of the story, translating it was quite a challenge. At the same time, it was rewarding as it helped push boundaries that impede translation. Since translation is not merely a semantic or linguistic exchange between the source and the target language, I have retained a few words in the Urdu original in order to preserve the cultural and regional essence associated with them. At times, it was difficult to replicate the Urdu punctuation and sentence structure in English. Transporting an entire cultural ethos in a cross-cultural linguistic culture is never easy. It is the translator's responsibility to stay true to the original landscape of the story while also making the story accessible to the target language reader. To this end, some liberty has been taken while translating.

This story is significant for its complexity, and Khaild Jawed's work is remarkable at many levels. At a time when there is little encouragement for Urdu writers, Jawed's contribution is commendable. His use of modernist and postmodernist techniques, including magic realism in Urdu literature, opens up new ways to look at Urdu literature itself.

“Shadows”

The lanes of this city do not witness those shadows anymore. Buildings have changed. Many buildings have been razed. Small shops have moved inside homes. There is less space for those shadows on the earth. It is hard to find empty spaces. Nowadays, even shadows clash with each other owing lack of space and erase each other's existence.

He returned to the city after at least twenty years. The city was then divided into two parts, old and new. He was returning here after attending a friend's wedding. To experience the old essence of the city, he set out, walking through it. The pathway to the city was broad and full of cross-lanes and broad pathways, and the sky was well lit by stars.

He was not walking briskly, like he always did. He was walking in the company and safety of his own shadow. Every day of February is monotonous in its own way. If you walk along this way in the month of February, the entire landscape feels so dry and barren. Leaves fallen off the trees are trampled beneath our feet. No matter how much you try to get rid of these leaves, they still follow you in your path and come beneath your feet, only to be trampled. In the fierce afternoon wind, they gather in a heap. No matter where you go, you cannot avoid this. All you can do is watch them as your parched lips grapple with the wild and fierce wind. The weather in the month of February is hardly anything to write home about. It is unlike any other season – looking at shadows for days on end – dry, despairing, monotonous days of February!

On that well-lit starry night, he crossed the railway line. Suddenly, there was a power cut. The game of hide-and-seek played by power cuts was rampant in this city. He stood still for a while and then clearly recalled the route to the old city through the new one. He thought of lighting a cigarette but then decided against it. And now he began taking firm steps towards Surma Gali, the lane known for its kohl, which was close by. Of all the things this city is famous for, kohl is superlative!

People here are crazy about wearing kohl in their eyes. They have set a set of rules with regard to it. For instance, it is worn mainly before going to bed or soon after waking up in the morning. At first glance, it seems as though everyone here is wearing kohl all the time. But the truth is, it is primarily the older people or children who wear it. The pimpled, wrinkled “Sāye” ...

and toothless faces of the older people and their dull eyes frighten others. And when they wear kohl, sadness and vulnerability sit on their faces like flies on their noses. Kohl-filled, smoky eyes of the elderly wait for death which is imminent. These eyes make the people look both, hilarious and vulnerable. The number of people with kohl-filled eyes is increasing with each passing day.

Then, there are milk-suckling babies. One can see kohl in their eyes as they lie in the laps of their mothers. And so, because of the kohl, their innocence and inexperience with how to get on in this world becomes evident. Their wide-open eyes are amused, frightened or expressive of pain. At times, they may look beautiful. Kohl enhances the beauty of the eyes of the little ones.

Even more interesting are the kohl-wearing hijras who can be seen everywhere engaging in vulgar behavior. Dressed in women's clothes, their dirty gaze and kohl-filled eyes are full of masculine lust; this turns them into human shadows. You must be careful of them. If they find you alone somewhere, you must readily give up your money and belongings to them — at times even your manhood and dignity. Otherwise, these eunuchs staring with their kohl-filled eyes and their foppish behavior might thrust a dagger into your chest. All of them keep big, dangerous knives with them.

After crossing Surma Gali, though he could not figure out why, he suddenly found himself becoming more and more somber. Except that whatever was visible was not enough. It was like a carnival, a fair. Except that the carnival was being held elsewhere. There was just an imitation of the carnival here. Only uneven shadows of people were visible everywhere. A dark invisible object, some horrible entity, had engulfed this world in its grip. Now, even life and death only have spirits trapped here and there. Shadows and spirits were presenting themselves as hilarious and vulnerable. Where was actual life then? And actual death? Where were its repercussions felt? Even though death was wrapped in seven folds of cloth, its effect must have been felt somehow. Even if it were in the form of a dwarf's shadow.

The mental asylum did not fall on the route he had taken. Even its dark, extended wall was not visible. One part of this mental asylum overlooked the graveyard. When some dead body is brought late at night with a gas lantern to show the way, the wall of the mental asylum becomes visible. And the spirit of the dead, along with others, hovers around its wall. One side of the wall of the mental asylum thrust into a wetland. Murders happened here, and unidentified dead bodies were left about. Some of them were found trapped between the asylum wall and the wetland. The wetland could never be cleared. Nobody knows what might have changed over there, now. Who knows where the shadows of that wall fall? But it was also "Sāye" ...

not clear that the shadows were falling elsewhere, he thought despairingly.

He began missing his childhood friend very much. They both used to go down to the river near the fort to immerse the earthen bowls after the *fatiha* was recited for Imam Hussain. Near the edge where they immersed the empty bowls, a big banyan tree grew, the shadow of which made the water look dark and gloomy, without any real reason. When they returned after the immersion of the bowls, they witnessed people distributing sherbet to those who were part of the Muharram procession. A frill coming out of a Muharram *tāzīya* got entangled around his neck. He fell down with suffocation and was dragged on the hard, concrete road. He was saved miraculously. “The days between the ‘*Ashura* of Muharram and *Cheblum* are quite tough,” my mother used to say.

After attaining manhood, his friend lost his mental balance. First, he tried to kill his wife and then, he tried killing himself. There was rumor that he often saw her spirit. And now he lives behind the formidable walls of the mental asylum. The same wall the shadows of which are falling somewhere. Suddenly, he regretted that the mental asylum would not be on his way. Owing to his poor sense of dressing, he was wearing a tie because he had to attend a wedding. Now, he felt that the tie was choking him. The electricity was restored and the road was well-lit again. A few people could be seen crossing the road, their goats roped to their hands.

It is Baqrid tomorrow, he recollected. He cannot tell what all he remembered. Reminiscing the bygone days and the silly episodes of youth had become his hobby even if his memory negated the historical truth.

The third and final reason for the popularity of this city was the Muharram celebration, which was not only unique, but also significant.

Like always, he felt that this city had walls and only walls. And their shadows were found here and there... everywhere. On the ninth day of Muharram, the *tāzīyas* stand against walls. These *tāzīyas* are called *takhts* over here. These *takhts* are actually made of wood; they are replicas of the tombs of the martyrs of Karbala. They are decorated with floral garlands and taken out in a mournful procession, like a somber pageant. People carry them either on their shoulders or on a trolley and parade them in the city. During the procession, in between the *naubas* or mournful elegies, the rhetoric of “dulha dulha” is also heard. These *takhts* are prepared by the working-classes of the city and are known by their names, such as the carpenters’ *takht*, the masons’ *takht*, the water-carriers’ *takht*, the washermen’s *takht*, the mystics’ *takht*, and so on. In structure, these *takhts* resembled the tombs or mausoleums or other holy places, but their inherent uniqueness lay in the fact that they represented the respective occupations of their makers.

Each had its own artistic style, and one can see the peculiarities unique to their makers' professions. That is the uniqueness of each of these *takhts*.

The most significant part of this is that if one makes a *takht* with loving conviction, he has to make it and lift it every year between the first and the eighth day of Muharram throughout his life. People might starve, but they dare not discontinue the tradition of making and lifting *takhts*. They believe that discontinuing this tradition will bring destruction upon them. The making of a *takht* is a lifelong process. A person will begin making a *takht* of smaller size and distinction. Then every year, the size and shape will change and it is improved and decorated during Muharram. This way, some *takhts* have become long, stretched, wide, tall and splendid-looking. He remembered how once, butcher's *takht* was longer than the wall of his house.

Those were indeed tough days. He got afflicted with smallpox. Despite burning with fever, he would listen to the *maatam* of kettle drums and other musical instruments beaten along with the procession carrying the *takht* somewhere far away. He did not understand why in those days no *takht* would pass through the lane of his house. He would ask his mother incessantly and nervously: "Is the *takht* coming?"

"No, but it will come. The butcher's *takht* will definitely pass down our lane," she would reply.

He would despairingly go back to listening to the *maatam*, and the kettle-drums, and a fever would engulf his whole body like a fire.

The butchers' houses were not far from theirs. They were in a dilapidated condition. Right from the entrance to the courtyard, dried bones, glass bottles, tin boxes, waste paper, trash and other garbage scattered everywhere. To pass by their houses, one had to cover one's nose with a piece of cloth. But people would say that they were wealthy. Sometimes a truck will stop in front of their houses. It was then, filled with sacks of bones. He was scared of bones in his childhood. Bones were part of the household, and he used to see them everywhere — on his table-mat, in the dustbin or near his cats. But he was always intimidated by the skulls. He realized this when the skulls were crushed to powder on the earth. Then, fear itself leaves the body alone with its owner, and it begins to lurk here and there aimlessly.

But the butchers' *takht* was splendid. And one day, it really came down the lane. The same, extended, tall, exquisite and breathtaking *takht*. It is well known that whenever it is lifted, there is much fuss across the city. A bloodbath follows. People also believed that on the eighth day of Muharram; blood oozes out from the upper section facing the niche of that

takht, and the scarlet color of the blood spreads across the sky in a short time. The butcher's *takht* was now crossing his lane. It was midnight. He woke up suddenly. The kettle-drum following the *takht* was loud and magnificent. The mournful tones of the beating drums almost caused an earthquake. It felt as if both the earth and the sky were reverberating. "Has the *takht* come?" he shouted.

"Yes, the *takht* is here, but don't get up, or your fever won't subside."

And just like that, lying in the courtyard, he saw the *takht*. The entire lane was bright with the light of the gas bulbs. The upper part of the *takht* was taller than the wall of his house. In front of it, was a tall, red 'alam that looked like it would touch the sky. The brightness of the gas bulbs was diminishing now. Because of their fading light, strange shadows danced on the roof of his house. Then the butchers' *takht* went far away. After that, the lamenting musical instruments transformed into shadows and then, they dissolved too. He felt petrified. He began to pant because of his fever. The lane was dark. Midnight dawned on the courtyard.

"Now it has come a long way", he thought while walking. "But isn't there anything else except Muharram to think and mourn about?" Tomorrow, it is Baqrid as well. There is a long, historical gap between Muharram and Baqrid, but can't we think more about Baqrid? For a moment, he was engulfed with guilt and tried recalling and reciting a few lines of *Surah Baqra*, only to fail miserably. But one question about the similarities between Muharram and Baqrid was haunting him incessantly.

After much brainstorming, he recalls that his smallpox was at its peak just a day before Baqrid, and he took a shower on the thirteenth day of Muharram. On the road he walked, were people of another faith. He was suddenly hit by a motorbike. He fell flat on the road. Right in front, bells in the Kali Temple were ringing. Evening was approaching. Morsels of meat wrapped in newspapers fell and scattered all over the road. The blood that flowed from his face and legs congealed and left a big black stain on the road. The white bones below his knees became visible. It was a dangerous accident. The entire month of Muharram passed with a lot of hardship.

"What else might have happened?" He began thinking hard again.

There was one straight line of blood that he was reminded of. A straight line that became deeper and longer with time. First, like a lane. Then, like a canal, and gradually, as it becomes darker, it gets lost in his heart. Its memory became like buried guilt or unexpressed grief. He continued walking with his head down. Tomorrow, Baqrid will be over. Then Muharram will begin soon.

Two goats are tethered in front of his house. There are two, very wild

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German Shepherds and Asian dogs in the house too. When the goats are tied inside the house late at night, the dogs are set free in the courtyard. Two fellow travelers were passing down the road, discussing the complex politics of the day. So, the goats are tied and the dogs have been set free — he tried to think about it rationally but failed. He was never good at thinking about things in this way.

Tomorrow, blood will flow in the sewers. But in the morning, before being sacrificed, the animals are bathed well. Sometimes, their eyes are filled with kohl and their foreheads decorated with henna. And rose garlands adorn their necks. The animal resembles a well-dressed groom ready for his marriage. Even the coarse, dark robe tied around the throat of the animal looks beautiful. Then the children feed the goats hot *jalebis*. He suspected the dogs were barking at the goats. The animal meant for the sacrifice is much revered. He was afraid that the soft hearts of the goats would be petrified by the horrifying dog-barks. It will be terrible if the innocent hearts of the goats are terrified by them. One should take these things seriously.

Tomorrow, blood will flow in the sewers. Blood is related to every entity on this planet. Even though the days of sacrifice and revelations are long gone, their shadows still linger and blood oozes from these shadows. Blood is connected with Muharram, too. In his childhood, he used to roam in the lanes of this city, holding the hand of his elder uncle.

How many walls were there in this city? Perhaps there was only one whose shadows lingered here and there. The decorated and rather sorrowful *takhts* were standing erect with the support of the shadows of these walls. The shadows of the wall were dry and sand fell from them. He was always pursuing these walls – the walls of these shadows.

On the rooftop of his village house, there was a dilapidated brick wall. One could see the faraway fields by just leaping-up a bit. There was also a well, on top of which, cow dung cakes were dried. The well had dried a long time ago. Now only dead bodies of lone dogs, cats or their dried-up skulls lay in it. He does not remember the name of the *takht* that was lifted from the front edge of this well. It was a small *takht*. Some poor man's *takht*. This *takht* was carried by one person who played the kettle-drum. There were some gas bulbs, too. The melancholic sound of the musical instrument reached the wall bordering the rooftop of his house. But what he vividly remembers is the old vendor behind the *takht* and people behind the glass bulbs who walked slowly. The vendor walked behind the lights holding a big platter on his shoulders. On top of his platter, a kerosene lamp flickered. He cannot recall what he was selling on that platter.

When he grew up a bit, he began going to the well to see the *takht*.

Roshan Baji's house was right there, close to this well, surrounded by cow dung cakes. There was a palm tree inside her house. A vampire with twisted feet lived on the leaves of the palm tree. The spirit of the vampire possessed Roshan Baji. The blood in her body was slowly drying up. She was becoming pale. Once when he was looking at a *takht* near the well, Roshan Baji called him to her house. In the earthen hearth, cow dung cakes burnt. Tea was coming to a boil in a dirty aluminum pot. He squatted in front of Roshan Baji. Suddenly he became conscious of her unusual gaze at him.

"You are a very pious boy," she murmured as she trembled. Then she bowed down and bit his cheek. He ran away nervously. On the top branch of the palm tree, an anklet's sound was heard. Chham, chham, chham, chham. The lamenting tone of a kettle-drum coming from the site of the *takht* made him run more hastily.

Roshan Baji is now gone for eternity. She grew paler and paler and eventually died. He never met her after that incident. She did not die very long ago. But she called him a few days before she died. "Come home sometime", a middle-aged voice said. Roshan Baji now had a telephone installed in her house and the palm tree had been felled. "Chham, chham, chham, chham". Suddenly, there was a power cut. It was dark all around, but he did not wait. It was a starry night. He felt even more depressed. His sadness and depression were like intoxicants seizing him. He could recall more of such events and memories. It was probably during Muharram when he gifted a book with a golden binding to an unusually tall and thin girl. On the first page of this book, he wrote the girl's name in his blood. "That blood again", he thought despairingly. But it was a pious and childish act, that was done in good faith. "You are a very pious man," she said giggling, when she read her name.

That tall and slim girl often laughed loudly. She had married, and the people in her locality did not consider her to be a decent woman. She used to tell him that almost every night at least once she dreamt of a new-born baby in her lap. Surprisingly enough, after waking up, her hands and lap would be very warm as if they had just been separated from a child. She would often tell him that if a child is born to her, she will make that child a devotee of Imam Hussain. And then she would out laugh aloud. He saw that she always wore bright clothes. She would also wear green bangles in her lean hands and long earrings in her ears. He never saw any other woman wearing such long earrings in his entire life. But he knew that behind those bright clothes, there was a weak body that had feeble muscles and bones, a pitiful and uneven nose, sagging breasts and a body longing for motherhood.

He was very pious. But of what use is this hideous piousness. That way
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even a devil or a ghost can claim to be pious. But how has the world changed in a good way by the self-centered and selfish ‘good’ deeds of devils and diabolic people?

And one day, he embraced the golden, bound book on which he had written her name with his blood, to his chest in silence, because she was laughing loudly and then she sat in a remote corner with her eyes closed. Her lean hands full of green bangles which were always warm after waking up from the dream turned cold. And then, later in his life, he could never find the wall or the shadow of that tall girl again. Why was he thinking about all this? Perhaps he wanted to become sadder. Piousness and sadness complement each other. He kept moving ahead as he became sadder and depressed.

There was a bent on the road. He had to go in that direction. He had to move forward while walking closer to the mortuary. Here, dead bodies were brought for postmortems. They were mostly those who were murdered for some reason or another. Here, bundles of white drapes were visible even in the dark. Nobody was crying or sobbing here. This space was in-between crying, sobbing and remembrance—barren, dry and devoid of any repercussions of grief. Sometimes, death creeps in slowly into a single space. The weight of death was heavier here. He felt as if the wall of the mortuary was leaning towards the front. He thought of lighting a cigarette. But the electricity was restored and he changed his mind once again.

He had to think more about Muharram. This city’s Muharram was unique. In his childhood, on the ninth day of Muharram he roamed aimlessly to see the *takhts* while holding his elder uncle’s finger. Now the *takhts* are standing with the support of the walls. And then, they would orbit around the city. Tomorrow, on the tenth day of Muharram, in the afternoon, these *takhts* wrapped in white sheets either on the shoulders of men who carried them, or on trollies, will be taken far away from the city near the fort’s riverbank to the ground of Karbala. The ground is actually the imitation of *Karbala-e Mo’alla* which the people of this city have created out of their faith, love and imagination. While being taken away to the Karbala ground, these *takhts* are covered in white sheets and there is no sound of any musical instruments accompanying them.

But today is the ninth of Muharram. In the lanes and crossroads of the city, *takhts* stand decorated. There are numerous electric bulbs all around them. There are fountains of water here and there. Near each *takht*, people are distributing free sherbet. There is a wooden platform on top of which green grass was growing. On this platform, two or three people were distributing milk sherbet to passersby. A large crowd of people gathered “Sāye” ...

hurriedly. People watched the takht with much enthusiasm. They drank milk sherbet, and then moved ahead to some other lane to see other *takhts*.

The lanes of the city that do not host any *takhts* are quiet. Sometimes, one can find a small *takht* at the doorstep of a house. An old man sitting next to his ordinary *takht* in a dim candlelight would be looking at the crossing of the lane. In the dim light, his feebleness would seem like it was trembling. No, there is no sherbet distribution here. For the whole night, incense burns on these *takhts* and *niyaz* is offered on sweets. The elegies of *Karbala* are chanted in low, mournful voices. But he realized that some *takhts* were bright and others were dull. He would hold his uncle's finger after feeling bewildered by this.

The city was divided into two parts – new and old. In the old city, there were traditional mansions made of brick and mortar. In the dim light, the shadows of the old minarets of the mansions would fall on the ground and that seem intimidating. He cannot understand these shadows and he stops out of fear. “What kind of shadow is this,” he asked timidly.

Far away on the road, something like an elephant's trunk was moving.

“That's . . . the half-burnt *minar*. We are going the other way, behind the wall of the burnt house. There is a *takht* there”, said the uncle.

“No . . . we are scared,” he tightly grasped his hands.

“Fear, what is there to fear,” the uncle asked laughingly.

Not then, but now he thought casually. Yes – really, what is there to be afraid of? And if the origins of the shadows cannot be traced; fearing them is quite irrational. They would roam around like this all night. They were strange people. They would stare at the *takhts* with their vacant eyes and move on. Behind them, the elegies would be chanted in low voices; incense would burn. But there were *takhts* and elegies elsewhere, too. He would get tired of walking. His feet would begin to ache.

Getting fed up, he would say, “let's go . . . we have seen enough of *takhts*.” Blood will be oozing from all the sides.

“So soon? Are you tired? It is not very late. The whole night awaits us,” uncle would say, his voice full of child-like happiness.

“Let's move forward – there is light over there. It's very crowded here”.

“That is the masons' *takht*. The art and fine work on it are worth seeing”. My uncle was fond of the mason's *takht*. In this *takht*, numerous wooden walls were joined with each other. And, there were several windows that would open one after another on their own. A massive crowd of people would come to see it. But unfortunately, due to the burning of incense and

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the sound of elegies, despite trying very hard, he could only see the walls of the *takht*. Only walls, he could never see the windows.

Where has he arrived? Perhaps, this is the place where, on the ninth day of Muharram, he stayed too long with his uncle. There was hardly any where *takht* now. He recalled that a group of girls wearing *burqas* walked past him. His uncle was looking in that direction. And, he also saw something else— A woman unveiled herself, and her big, innocent eyes full of love and desire, were riveted on his uncle. He looked at her again. On her lips was a strange smile. A kind of smile that did not validate the love and desire in her eyes. There was a kind of indifference and deceit in her smile. He felt his heart was sinking. Afterwards, the shadows of the old mansion swept over him.

“Let’s go home. We have seen enough *takhts*,” the boy said resignedly.

“Hey, are you sleepy? Today is the night of celebration. You want to sleep so soon?”

But he was sticky with sweat. Sleep was trying to look out for him and seduce him. As always, he began to panic. Spirits were flowing everywhere like blood. There was also the fear of that scary old man. He suddenly realized as he was walking, that there hadn’t been a power cut in a while. Now he had walked through the old city – more befuddled and more depressed than before. There was still much to see in the Muharram processions. From one *takht*’s lane to another, the followers of Imam Hussain were walking hastily in throngs. The crowd made way for them. They were wearing green-colored clothes. Bells were tied to their bodies. In the silence of the night, he would wake up to the sounds that bespoke their bravery and to the sounds of their heavy steps and the bells tied to their bodies.

“Who’s there,” he asked nervously.

“Don’t speak like that. They are Imam Hussain’s followers.” He would not understand anything his mother said, and there were other things that he did not understand either!

During Muharram, sometimes a child from his locality would come to his house dressed as a Sufi mystic who had taken his vows, wearing green robes, carrying a wooden stick in his hand, on which was tied a beautiful bundle. Around his neck he would wear a cloth neckpiece, and in his eyes were decked with kohl.

“I will also take the vows and become a mystic,” he would happily look at him and say.

“They are mystics who have taken vows, they are not ordinary people. Not everyone can become a *faqir*”.

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“What does ‘mannat ka faqīr’ mean, Amma”?

“If someone’s children do not survive, they take this vow that if a child is borne to them, they will make that child a devotee of Imam Hussain”. Mother tried explaining, and like always, I wouldn’t understand a thing.

The child who was a ‘mannat ka faqīr’ would continuously stare and smile at him. Now, he understands that the smile of that ‘mannat ka faqīr’ was not an ordinary one. It had hidden within it the pain of all the children who did not survive or who died because their mothers miscarried. In this smile was also concealed the pain of those green bangles, the pain of longing for a child.

He always regretted that he was not a ‘mannat ka faqīr.’ Muharram rituals were unique in this city, he thought. He only had one regret. During his childhood, he regularly roamed around through the night on the ninth day of Muharram, even if he was frightened. He would never witness those scenes again. All those scenes that the people describe with pride and enthusiasm. Once, on the ninth day of Muharram, at the time of Fajr prayer, a strange and almost unreal occurrence happened. It seemed as if a shadow crossed a *takht* and disappeared, just like a cloud. In that moment, the lights grew pale and dim. If observed closely, one can see that the highest minaret of the *takht* has bent down. Near that *takht*, on the edges of the ‘*alam*’, a bloodstain becomes visible and then disappears. It is possible that his watchful eyes exaggerated the scene. He never trusted his eyes much, anyway. But once, something unusual happened, and it was certainly not during Muharram. He clearly remembers that it was during a scorching June afternoon. He heard the sound of *takhts* while they were being lifted, along with the lamenting sounds of the musical instruments. Mother was frightened. “O God, please help,” she cried.

Father looked at her and said, “don’t you know that there is an epidemic?”

A host gust of wind suddenly blew away the curtain in the courtyard. “What pandemic,” questioned mother, her face becoming pale.

“How can I name it? That same children’s disease. Thousands of children have died.”

Outside, in the hot wind, low, elegiac tones of mournful verses could be heard. Does it happen anywhere else that people lift a *takht* during a pandemic or any crisis? Do people mourn? Do *imambāras* remain open? Do people pray to the martyrs of Karbala? He becomes terrified. Sometimes, the epidemic changes its form and roams in the city and takes away children. Who was that terrifying old man? He thought. The man, wearing glasses, disabled, staring here and there every moment, and present everywhere. A

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terrifying, old man. That short old man's figure deserved respect and devotion. His veins were bulging out. He wore spectacles the lenses of which were tied to his ears with the help of a thick thread. He wore a lungi folded up to his knees and wooden clogs, and with a bowl in his hands, he walked about almost every lane – like a demon. His cracked feet could be seen from his clogs. The children of the locality feared him and chased him whenever they could. When he came out begging, older children would follow him and shout:

“Hamidan's horse has lost its sanity”.

He would turn suddenly and carrying a small stone in his hand, he would run after children like a mad horse. The beggar's heavy steps would alert everyone. He would curl and fold-up like a neighing horse. His frightening front teeth would become visible. In a feminine voice, he would start abusing everyone. It was very frightening indeed. His feminine, mysterious and piercing voice (like grinding bones) would make it all even more sinister.

On the occasion of Baqrid, that intimidating old man begged for meat with a bowl in his hands. In those days of the epidemic, no animals were sacrificed at home. If anyone tried to shoo him away, he would stubbornly sit at the doorstep and, moaning and smiling in a feminine voice, he would beg. Then someone from another locality would call out: “Hamidan's horse has lost its sanity,” and he would run behind that voice like a savage horse. He would take out the pebbles that were tied to his lungi in his hands. The sound of his wooden clogs would be heard in the distance locality like an epidemic.

It was well known that this beggar was foul-mouthed and obtruse. He would never forget his abusers and follow them secretly, for miles with gentle footsteps. At this time, his clogs made no sound at all. The pebbles would be gripped in his palms.

Nobody knew the secret behind his insanity. Once that beggar had become obsessed with him also. Even though he never dared to tease him, such weird things would keep happening to him. So, he was not surprised. Those days he went to fetch buffalo milk from the dairy with the other children every evening. One evening, when he went to fetch the milk, the beggar began following him with his clogs silent as ever, and pebbles in his fists like a moaning devil. He realized this only after he entered the dairy. That scary devil who wore glasses was waiting for him to come out. He was standing outside the dairy, close to the wall of the sewer. Evening had approached. Dust was settling; birds were returning to their nests. He stood nervously inside the dairy for a long time, holding the milk pot in his hands.

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One side of the milk pot was broken. His nails and fingertips began to hurt. There was fodder under his feet and a buffalo was mooing. It will become dark in some time. How could he come out of the dairy after fetching the milk? His home was not far from there. He began sweating. The knot of his tie was suffocating him. His checked coat was quite warm. Despite being middle-aged, he was not panting while walking. He wiped the sweat off his nose after taking off his glasses. His mouth filled with the foul odor of a burp instigated by the *pulao* he had eaten at the wedding feast. Then he realized he should have had *paan* after eating this kind of food.

Paan? Did he want an increase in his depressive state? Just as opium-consuming people consume more sweets to remain in that state? This was undoubtedly the case.

That cat-faced, super active girl cooks delicious *pulao*. She would often invite him for a *pulao* feast. Her house was large. There were several verandas, rooms, and staircases. She would keep the plates of *pulao* in front of him, and she would also sit in front of him, precisely like a stray cat who sits in the front of people who are eating. This cat-faced, sharp-eyed girl's feet were always chapped. Her cracked heels had marks of crevices. After he finished his meal, she would abruptly open her closed palms while looking here and there. In her palm, would be a small *paan* wrapped and wrinkled in her hands. She would stuff his mouth with it and, kissing his forehead, say, "You are an extremely pious man--extremely pious".

Now, the stain of the betel leaf will shine like a stain of blood. But it was not just that. There was something more important than this. On the tenth day of Muharram, at noon, she would call him to her house and make him sit in front of her, and recite *Du'a-e 'Ashūra* (prayer of Muharram). She firmly believed that whosoever recited this prayer or listened to it would not die in the upcoming year. If someone was destined to die that year, then one way or another, that person will not be able to listen to this prayer. Whenever she recited this prayer, she would cover her head with a white shawl. The cat-like piousness now transforms into something secretive.

Secretive something? He would think often about it. But he could never figure out anything more than the fact that her countenance looked dignified. The kind of dignity and steadfastness that originates somewhere else, beyond this world. And, he couldn't comprehend this piety and its appearance. Every time he left her house after *Dua-e Ashra*, the afternoon would have shrunk into the evening. And, the shadows of the evening would move to and fro, changing their images at the staircase of the big, well-furnished house. He was not wrong about her steadfastness. She had shown stubbornness even in a simple matter, despite his kind and diligent approach to it.

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This year in the afternoon of the tenth day of Muharram, the cat-like, clever girl did not call him to her house, nor did she recite the Muharram prayer.

“You recite the *Du’a-e ‘Ashūra* yourself. I won’t recite it”.

Looking at her with her blank eyes, he asked “but why,” in a flat, feeble voice, and her face became unfriendly as a cat’s.

“Just like that. I want death”. An unexplainable white shadow of death was hovering over her lips. Then he saw her stubbornness clearly, one that was visible in her eyes and which was flowing through her chapped heels and ankles. He was not against age-old customs and thinking. One can estimate from this that there is a world beyond the one we see. This beginning of all knowledge is hidden in this mysterious knot. That afternoon, he left her big and well-furnished house for the last time. The hot summer breeze was blowing. On the roads, *takhts* wrapped in white sheets were moving fast.

When he reached his house, he asked his mother to recite the *Du’a-e ‘Ashūra* and then, he felt contented. When did the cat-like active girl’s pious figure transform into a pool of blood and depart this world? He could not recall. And till date, every year, he would ask someone to recite this prayer for him. Unfortunately, he did not know a single word of Arabic.

The world needed a lot of pious and brave people. Cowardice is a zig-zag path leading to courage. He always took pride in his diffidence. This is now the last phase of inebriation. After this, despair can only fall like a heap of rubble. It cannot go further up. He suddenly realized while walking, that at this stage of his despair, there was much to mock as well. But how does it matter anyway? Despair has its own distinct value. It is self-reliant, just like every *tāziya* has its own special value.

“Tell me, brother, did you see the *tāziyas*,” someone from a distance asked.

“Yes, brother, I have seen the *tāziyas*.” On the other side of the fields, on the other side of the wall, on darker nights in the dim light of vendor’s shops, I saw the shadow of an unknown light of a *tāziya*. The shadow fell on strange buildings and mysterious places. I have spent a lifetime watching *tāziyas*. Now, he had to stop walking. Tomorrow, it is Baqrid. Now, he stood in the goats’ market, set up specially for Baqrid. There was a big crossroad. Now, if you walk thirty steps to the left of this crossroad and thirty steps to the right then one can reach exactly that house. But before walking thirty steps to the left, it is mandatory to cross the dairy. In his childhood a circus marquee was put up at the crossroad where the goats are bleating. A small, cheap circus that would roam around the city. What is a circus? The drama “Sāye” ...

of animals. All the characters of this tragedy are animals. However, the circus also has jokers. Even then, the most honest joker is an elephant, a monkey or a parrot, and it would also become the catharsis for the viewers.

A significant part of night had passed. That was why the market was now dispersing. White, black, brown goats were bleating. Gas lamps lined the floor. In the sad, blue light of the bulbs, one could see the lengthy shadow on the rope to which the goats were tethered and its shimmer touching the walls. His feet crushed the goat-droppings and straw laid out for them. There was a foul stench everywhere. Now he had to turn back. The sound of his shoes rose and fell flatly on his ears. They fell softly because a well-built man was not walking in them. It was just one lone, sad and pious man going his way. It was an old lane. The lane where in his childhood the ball would be tossed and get lost. A ruin, the shadows of a dilapidated and deserted school, a dairy, and a little later if he turns left, he will be standing right in front of his house. Now he bent a little more while walking; while looking at his own shadow on the ground. The bleating of goats and the shadows of thick ropes were left behind. The lane was deserted. Nobody was around.

“Hamidan’s horse has lost its sanity” said somebody loudly from behind the ruins of time.

“Stop, you motherfucker,” someone hissed like a snake.

He was riddled by bullets from four, country-made pistols in loaded with cartridges.

“What is the matter?” he said.

“Bring that motherfucker and tie him. We will shoot him.”

He dragged and brought him there, in front of the milk dairy and near the sewer, along the wall. On the left, was the way to his house. He stood there, with his head down. There was a sharp knife behind him. The pistol was inserted right inside him. His tie was hanging unevenly.

“Shoot the motherfucker.”

“Shoot him.”

“Just tear his stomach. Kill him.”

He failed to understand why they wanted to kill him. But he did not want to know the reason now. He was a pious man, ready to be martyred. He dragged him close to the wall adjoining the sewer. His shoulders and back were cold and numb. Somewhere far away, bells were ringing in the Kali Temple. He stood there, with his eyes closed. On top of his head, was the starry sky.

Where were the shadows of these pistols falling? The knife would
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glimmer in front of his eyes, yet he was not able to see its shadow. He sensed that perhaps the guns pressing against his body were the shadows of the real guns. The actual pistol's muzzle was elsewhere. The actual pistol will also differ in shape from this. The real face of a gun's muzzle would be wider. The shadows appeared darker and uglier than that. The piercing pain of a knife is just an image of the actual knife, and hence it feels colder than the actual knife and more nauseating too.

Suddenly, a brick fell from the dilapidated wall of the dairy. A brown-colored cat jumped and disappeared into the darkness. Then, the knife on his back moved away. The pistol moved away from the body.

“Dhap, dhap,” the foul spirits of the four hijras with *surma*-filled eyes were seen and then they too disappeared. Standing under the shadows of stars, he was dancing and looking at his shadow. Was the golden bound book shining in the sewer? Behind the wall, the cat-like super-active girl was reciting Dua-e Ashra.

“You are a pious man”, she said abruptly and began reciting the prayer. He could see his good deeds emerging out of the shadows and they were dancing in a silly way in the lane. He viewed the shadows of his good deeds squarely. He had an inkling that somewhere a *takht* is being lifted and mournful elegies were being sung. Which crisis or epidemic has swallowed the city, he wondered. When some hijras with *surma* in their eyes abuse you and want to kill you, must you believe that the city is under the grip of an epidemic? He fixed his glasses over his nose. His tie was still swirling erratically. While fixing it, he felt as if he was touching a thick rope. No, there is no hole in this coat. There are no bloodstains on his coat. Only his checkered coat is swirling around in the wind. In the right pocket of his coat, his cigarettes and matchboxes are lying safe. He is rising up from the older veins of his existence. He is emerging like a flicker of hope. Like a coincidence. Like a misunderstanding. Was he still sad?

No. Sadness had fulfilled its purpose and walked away. Sadness itself had saved him. Whenever we are sad, we become conscious of our existence. Personal sadness is like a helpful intoxication—the instigating and rich intoxication of knowing the truth of death before death itself. But sadly, before actual death, our body and senses are not ready to accept their truth. He is returning after touching and tasting death.

Then, he paused and thought: “Was he touching death or was it just a show?”

Sacrifice, martyrdom, love and death are not futile. Their imitation is pointless. It was not death. It was a hijra imitating the show of death. The hijra had cracked a lewd joke on him. That is why he felt a deep sense of

sorrow now. It was a kind of sadness that was not easy to express. He could not do anything about it except forgive the sins that lingered in the shadows of the dark and quiet night, beneath the stars and deserted lanes, where his unconscious dark thoughts resided. Finally, after becoming weary of the sadness, he took this step.

But then, where was death? If this was just an imitation, where was actual death?

Maybe, it was hiding behind the shadow of that horrible, formidable wall. Or, it was hiding among other futile entities of the universe. Yes, but there was one crucial difference that appeared – When the pistols are moved from your body, when the fright stops pricking your back, you become a new person, just like a person coming out of his shower or a person after an afternoon’s siesta.

Now, he began moving towards his home like a new person. But, becoming a new person is not a remarkable achievement in itself. Here, one could come back only as a ghost – and indeed, he was coming back, without being covered with blood-stains – not like a human being, but a spirit or shadow. Like a mountain that has been forever, cared for not by good deeds or prayers but by the air and spirits. That is why he would be at the door of his house without any stains on his coat.