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"Faisla"[1]

Musharraf Alam Zauqi
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Musharraf Alam Zauqi was a well-known modern (some would say postmodern) Urdu novelist and short story writer, who also forayed into literary criticism and poetry. Born in Arrah, Bihar, on 1st March, 1962, Zauqi began writing in his teens and had finished writing his first novel, *Uqāb kī Ānkheṇ* (eyes of punishment), by the age of seventeen. In his next three years, he wrote three more novels, which were, however, published only in the last decade of the twentieth century, *Nīlām Ghar* (auction house; 1992); *Shahar Chup Hai* (the city is silent; 1996); and *Zab'h* (sacrifice; 2000). In fact, it was from 1990 onwards that most of Zauqi's books were published. His other novels published around this time include *Bayān* (expression; 1995) and *Professor S kī Ajeeb Duniyā: Via Tsunami* (the strange world of Professor S: via tsunami; 2005). Several short-story collections appeared in the 1990s. The titles alone testify to the breadth of his thought and social concerns: *Bhūka Ethiopia* (hungry Ethiopia, 1993), *Ek Anjāne Ḳhauf kī Rehearsal* (rehearsal of an unknown Fear, 1995), *Mandī: Nayī Kahāniyāṇ 1990-1997* (market: new stories 1990-1997; 1997), *Ġhulām Baḳhsh aur Dīgar Kahāniyāṇ* (Ghulam Bakhsh and other stories; 1998), and *Sadī ko Alvida Kahte Hue* (bidding adieu to the century, 2000). A wide-ranging writer, his oeuvre includes not only novels and short stories (which are better known) but also poems and literary criticism. His collection of poems, *Leprosy Camp: Ek Tavīl Nasrī Nazm* (Leprosy Camp: a long prosaic poem) appeared in 2000. He published literary criticism in the last decade of his life. His literary critical books include *Āb-e Ravān-e Kabīr: Tanqidī Mazāmīn* (the flowing water of Kabir: Critical Essays; 2013), *Silsila-e Roz̤-o Shab: Urdu Novels kā Ḳhusūsī Mut'ala* (the sequence of day and night: a special study of urdu novels, 2014), and *Adabī Script* (Literary Script, 2019), the last one

[1] Translated from *Ek Anjāne Ḳhauf kī Rehearsal* Arshia Publications, 1995, pp. 335-39.

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being dedicated to his son Sasha Alahm, who is a documentary filmmaker. His later novels include *Le Sāñs bhī Āhista* (breathe slowly; 2011), *Ātish-e-Rafta ka Surāgh* (clue to the fire of the past; 2013), *Musalmān* (muslim; 2014), *Nālā-e Shabgīr* (nocturnal lament; 2015) and *Marg Amboh: ὁλοκαυστὸν* (death mob: holocaust; 2019), while his later short stories were published in collections such as *Nafrat ke Dinoṇ Meṇ* (in the days of hate; 2013). Zauqi has also been published in Urdu and Hindi literary magazines, including *Bīsvīṇ Sadī* (twentieth century), *Shabḳhūn* (night blood) (Urdu), *Hans* (swan) and *Kādambinī* (clouds) (Hindi). The multiple awards which were conferred upon Zauqi include the Krishan Chander Award, the Sir Syed National Award, the Urdu Academy Delhi Award, and the International Human Rights Award. He passed away in Delhi during the second wave of COVID-19 on 19th April, 2021.

Of what drove him to remain prolific over the decades, Zauqi said that, "Literature is a complete responsibility. … I am counted among those people who have spent each day in the lap of literature" *("adab ek pūrī zimmedārī hai … maiṇ un logoṇ meṇ shāmil hūṇ jinhoṇ ne apnī zindagī kā har din adab kī āġhosh meṇ guzārā hai")* (Zauqi 2:19-4:09). Zauqi's literary sensibility was, first and foremost, fed by the breadth and depth of his reading. If, on the one hand, he read and championed critically neglected novels, such as Farzana Begam's *Sangam* (confluence) (Zauqi 18:50-19:05) and short stories, such as Sajjad Haider Yaldram's "Dost kā Ḳhat" ("Letter from a Friend") (Zauqi 12:40-13:00, 19:30-20:20) then, on the other hand he also read and even borrowed the epigraphs of his own books from Edgar Allan Poe, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Jean Paul Sartre, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. His wide reading was supplemented by his acute sensitivity to and observation of his own times—he said, "think of the litterateur as standing on top of the Eiffel Tower and looking at the entire world" *("adīb ko yuṇ samajhiye kī voh Eiffel Tower par khaṛa hai aur pūrī duniyā ko dekh rahā hai")* (Zauqi 7:10-7:18). All of Zauqi's literary output is a direct and clear response to the various aspects of the changing social, political, and economic structures both in India and in a rapidly globalising world. Talking about his own novelistic practice, he said, "My attempt has been to pick a new subject for each novel, to search for a new world in each novel" *("merī koshish yeh rahtī hai maiṇ har novel meṇ ek nayā mauzū uthāūṇ, har novel meṇ ek nayī duniyā kī talāsh karūṇ")* (Zauqi 5:23-5:33). Broadly, the themes of his fiction are twofold: one, the changing or perhaps permanently changed situation of the minorities in the evolving socio-political scenario of the country, and, two, the changes brought about by the rapid march of globalization not just globally but also nationally, which, for him, have produced a new human being—a new man and a new woman (Zauqi 5:40-6:13, 30:15-30:45). Zauqi

is modern insofar as modern implies engagement with the present and the contemporary. His themes are rooted in everyday realities, presented in detail, and his style brings out the deeper socio-political undercurrents beneath those realities. Zauqi wrote in a clear, direct, and forceful idiom, and rejected the confusions of style and thought which are often, and, according to him, incorrectly, passed off as modern writing (Zauqi 23:00-23:15). Indeed, Zauqi redefined what is considered "modern." While he was a sharp observer of his society and the world beyond, he imaginatively reworked what he observed according to his "vision", which, he believed, distinguishes the "genuine" writer from ordinary people (Zauqi 28:40-28:55, 29:20-29:44). Zauqi felt that the Urdu critical establishment had done immense damage to fiction by relegating it to a status lower than poetry and underestimating the genre's demands on the creative writer's abilities (Zauqi 35:35-37:10, 37:40-38:30). His critical essays (collected across three books) attempt to redeem fiction from this critical misjudgement and redefine it from the position of not only a prolific fiction-writer but also a voracious fiction-reader (one of his charges against prominent Urdu critics being that they had not read enough fiction before passing sweeping judgments against it) (Zauqi 16:35-16:45, 17:05-17:40).

"Faisla" ("The Compromise") was published as part of Zauqi's 1995 short story collection *Ek Anjāne K̤hauf kī Rehearsal* (rehearsal of an unknown fear). Narrated by a young Indian Muslim girl, whose supposed name, Kausar Bi, reminds one of a later encounter-killing involving a woman bearing the same name, "Faisla" is the story of her dream-vision in which she meets the renowned Urdu writer Sa'adat Hasan Manto. Set in post-Independence India, "Faisla" depicts the powerful socio-political forces active in the country which force even the uncompromising Manto to make a decision that involves a moral compromise. Throughout the story, Manto's character repeatedly emphasises his inability to find words to write about these forces and their impact on people. Manto's character contrasts his present inability to write with that period of the real Manto's life when he wrote one short story every day, a period which lasted a whole month. These, and other stories from another fruitful though shorter period of Manto's life, have been collected in *Roz̤ Ek Kahānī* (2018), published by Vani Prakashan in Devanagari. The story's allusions to riots and encounter killings, Manto's inability to write, and his compromise at the end of the story collectively suggest the deeper socio-political reasons for the *anjāna k̤hauf* or the unknown fear which is rehearsed in the narrator's dream.

"The Compromise"

I had been observing him for the last three or four days. When, where … it is perhaps not possible for me to tell you all this in proper sequence,

or you could probably say that I'm trapped in a psychological disquiet that leaves me incapable of telling you anything. I wake up suddenly at night. I feel that I'm in an unfamiliar street or on a bus. Then it seems that a police van pulls up in front of me or ahead of the bus. Policemen take position all around the bus … and then a blood-soaked corpse outlined by a circle of chalk drawn on the road—a story of an 'encounter' or a fabricated gunfight. Those dreaming of power and pelf get busy drafting reports of their bravery to send them to the authorities.

No, perhaps there is absolutely no need to tell you who I am or where I stay. I'm a girl from a minority community of this country—which, if we go by statistics, has a population of not less than twenty or twenty-five crores, and can no longer be considered a minority. I also do not know why our politicians, our guides, continue to hold such a huge community captive in this psyche of minority identity despite our numbers exceeding the population of many countries—but let it be, I don't want to get involved in these political games. I only want to talk about the dream which startled me.

Wearing dirty white pyjamas and broken slippers, he donned a pair of old-fashioned glasses— there was a wild glint in his eyes, one you wouldn't find even in the fiercest-looking vultures. But at that moment, there was a deep seriousness in place of that wild glint.

He was sitting at my writing table, without my permission; papers strewn around; teeth stained dark and fingers yellowed from smoking; dishevelled hair he did not feel the need to run a comb through.

I had been observing him for the last three days. I was really scared the first day. A man in my room … I was trembling as I asked him in a shaky voice: "Who are you …?"

"Ah …! I'm sorry," he replied in a low voice.

"What are you writing …?"

He turned to look at me— "I want to write something … but …I'm unable to find words. You remember, don't you, that there was a time when I wrote a story every day?"

"Don't exaggerate. A story every day—that lasted only a month. You were short of money for cigarettes and alcohol. You'd write stories, give them to the editor, and buy a bottle of alcohol with whatever he gave you. You … didn't even care for your loving wife."

He did not even seem to register what I said. He was thinking about something else … "I had such an abundance of words. Even when Toba Tek Singh was about to close his eyes in no-man's land … and that terrifying thanda gosht—cold meat—… it's all coming back to me now, I

can feel it … that doomed afternoon … when, at the doctor's command, the girl started untying the drawstring of her pyjamas. Even then, I had words."

"And now …"

But he seemed to have vanished right before my eyes.

I was rattled by that disturbing dream.

I suppose I should tell you my name. Kausar Bi, or whatever you like—you can even choose a prettier name for me if you fancy. Fires raged outside when I was born … they smouldered as I grew, breaking into flames time and again. The discordant notes of savagery and hooliganism outside drove me to books. Books became my closest friends; and as I read them, and without meaning to, I somehow ended up becoming friends with Manto—he with those big, menacing eyes. But I'd never thought that this lean, sickly-looking writer would one day return—in my dreams.

No, it is necessary to recall that day. Vultures of terror wheeled above the city once again—police jeeps moved in and out of minority neighbourhoods with deliberate regularity. Memories of tragedies that had struck them two to three years back were still fresh in people's minds. They now returned as threats in new guises. Well, I'm not a journalist and, anyway, you see all this on television. But I do remember that it rained heavily that morning—we were confined to our houses—you can well imagine what it feels like to be a stranger in your own house. We had an early dinner that night and went off to sleep—no one was interested in reports of fake encounters aired on the television. I came into my room … closed the window and lay silently on my bed.

No, ah! I apologize for that terrifying dream. But that night Manto was in my room again. And it was not a trick that my eyes were playing on me.

"Let's go out for a while …"

"Are you crazy … you want to go out in this eerie curfew-like silence?"

"I know. The situation is grim."

"The police will arrest us."

"They won't arrest us"—he was laughing— "they'll kill us in an encounter …"

"You know everything … yet you talk of going out, roaming around …"

He was suddenly serious … "Nothing will happen. We will go around for a mile or two and then get back …"

"A mile or two … on foot?"

"Shhh … I've brought a car… Stolen it …" he was laughing. Very few people know that I even drove Qaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah around.'

"I know. Also, that you had crashed his car."

Manto was laughing. "Don't worry. I'll be careful this time."

I looked at the clock. It was three o'clock. The streets were deserted. I opened the window … the ground was still wet. I don't know what strange effect this frail writer of forty-two or forty-three had on me that I went along with him. Rain-drenched streets, dogs barking and wailing … we got into the car. The car sped off … coming across dozing police jeeps every now and then, but Manto was lost in his thoughts—as if he wanted to take in the city and its desolation with his eyes. At one or two places the police pulled us over to ask a couple of questions. I have absolutely no recollection of what Manto smilingly replied to them. All I could see in the dark was the sandalwood tilak he had smeared on his forehead. He laughed out loud at my terror—

"Didn't I tell you that nothing would happen … just a bit further …"

We had already travelled for more than four or five kilometres. When Manto suddenly swerved the car onto a side road I yelled at him— "Where are you going …?"

"Shhh … he put his finger to his lips—the past doesn't die so easily. Don't say a word. Just keep going with me." I wanted to tell him that the past never dies, but for some reason, I held back.

It was four in the morning now. We were in an invisible slum inhabited by a minority community. Tiny mud huts in which horse-cart drivers and daily wagers lived. The dogs were still barking. Some households were already awake. Chulhas—mud cooking stoves—had been lit. We also saw some children loitering outside one or two houses … women moved purposefully in and out of the huts … and suddenly it happened … something terrible—right in front of the car—a small child from the minority community and a small calf—Manto, with his devil-may-care driving, had just a split-second to decide what to do.

"No—" you can stop reading the story over here if you want to. I will not ask you to read further … because what you read hereon is immoral, inhuman, excruciatingly painful, and deeply disturbing—against basic human rights. In those final moments, as I squeezed my eyes tightly shut, I saw the calf bound away to safety … Manto veered the car towards the child from the minority community—No. I repeat what I had earlier said, please be kind enough to expunge this brutal and cruel detail from the story.

We had returned home. Manto was near the bars of the window. There

was dust on his glasses. He was puffing on his cigarette.

"You could have saved the child …" I screamed.

"Either calf or child …" He probably shouted back louder— "the death of a child from the minority community will be forgotten in a couple of hours. Do you realize what the death of a calf in that slum …?"

Manto turned—he tore up all the pages strewn over the table and threw them into the dustbin.

Manto had vanished … but the chair he was sitting on a few moments ago was still rocking.

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