

The Angelic Disposition (EXCERPT)

Published in DAWN, May 2008

By Amer Hussein

1

I was watering flowerbeds in the garden when my husband came through the gate and said:

‘You’ll have to be strong. Your friend...’

He didn’t need to tell me whom he was talking about.

2

I’ve often thought about this: there are people who are born to sorrow and others who learn to grieve along the way. I’m one of the latter kind. But you were born to happiness. How shallow that sounds. Perhaps I should say: you were born to make others happy.

3

I first met Rafi Durrani — when? I’d seen him, heard him read his stories, long before I first spoke to him. Once, at a picnic, he sang a melancholy Punjabi wedding song, I remember the way he entered a room: swaggering slightly, and then he’d bow to the left and the right as if he were saluting the invisible angels, his thin tanned hand, raised in a salute, grazing his forehead.

He’d published his first collection of stories, *Restless Birds*, in ’33, I think. Siddiq Saheb gave it to me to read. Rafi wasn’t quite 20. His writing was romantic, verged occasionally on the sentimental, but with a fresh lyricism I hadn’t ever come across in Urdu fiction. People spoke of foreign influence and bourgeois sensibility. Then he published his second book. He was telling the same stories of lost loves and the frivolities of childhood, but his light touch was lighter still; in place of the early tearful undertow, the new stories were fragrant with mischief, redolent of laughter. Children played jokes, students tricked teachers, girls masqueraded as boys, boys

dressed up in burqas to trick their mates. One story, in particular, I loved. A young teacher, down on his luck, travels to a big city to earn his living and meets a childhood friend who gives him a job as tutor to his sister who's preparing for an exam. The young teacher falls in love with his student — or rather, responds to her virginal advances. Their love is discovered and the boy is thrown out by the girl's father. But then the girl's brother arranges for the young lovers to elope. They move to a native state, where the young couple both find jobs teaching the rulers' children. One day, the brother knocks at their door: his father has banished him too. The story ends with the phrase: 'We'll look after you now.' We don't know whether the voice is the hero's or the heroine's.

I'd started to write by then, but signed my essays with the androgynous 'S. S. Farouqi'. I, too, wanted to write a story, about a cousin of mine and the girl he fell in love with, who chose to marry his much richer best friend. But I felt guilty about liking Rafi's story, and about wanting to write a romantic tale myself, though mine was as close to the truth as Rafi's probably was.

Rafi was of medium height and medium colouring, and he seemed surprisingly weightless. In his world, darkness seemed not to exist. And yet I could recognise compassion in him, too: his wasn't the wit of callousness or disdain. He wasn't a Marxist; neither was I.

But to sing so blithely of love in a time before siege? Those were strange days. We — the scholarly, the teachers and doctors and lawyers — were trying to find a place in a world that we were increasingly aware was no longer our own; and we felt obliged to write about change, to write to change it all.

4

How I published my first short story, in 1936:

We were driving along the dirt roads from Fatehpur Sikri to Dholpur in April. The fields were bare of mustard and wheat, but along the way you could see high piles of chaff, of mustard seeds, and even higher piles of cow-dung cakes. It was the season of pumpkins and the fields were dotted with little yellow pumpkin flowers. Sugarcane saplings were still young but growing, growing. On the road, our car hit the mud-smearred rump of a hairy black piglet, which ran, bleeding and squealing, from our path. Our Hindu driver said: 'They'll bash it to death and eat it now. Those miserable untouchables. They keep them as pets. They let them out at night to eat all the rubbish they can find and then in the morning they take them to feed again at cesspools. When they're fat enough they set them on fire alive and eat chunks of their flesh while the wretches scream. If the pigs are wounded or die, they cook and eat them.'

A little way down the road, I saw a pond where egrets, their every move elegant, were washing their wings. Nearby, in a puddle or a ditch, a dun sow wallowed with her piglets around her. I'd

never thought much about pigs before: when I was a girl, we weren't even allowed to mention them, they belonged with the other unmentionables like snakes and lizards and dogs. But I reached Dholpur that night and wrote. About a sow and her brood, the kidnapping of one of her piglets for food, the dispersal of the rest, the sow's lonely struggle to survive. I showed it to Siddiq Saheb, as I always did in those days. He didn't say much, just: 'Can't you make the sow into a bitch? Or a donkey? You know how we feel about pigs.'

It seemed pointless to explain to my pragmatic husband that that was the point, but then he said: 'It's a good story.'

'Story? It's an essay...'

'It's a story. In your second draft you have to get rid of that arch and knowing tone.'

I went back to my draft. I wasn't deft enough a writer then to tell the story in a sow's voice. (Much later, though, I would write tales for children in the voices of a cat, a squirrel and a monkey.) But I came as close as possible to the sow's point of view, abandoning the bird's eye perspective of my first draft. The first editor went one step further than Siddiq Saheb: he wanted me to turn, my Suwwariya into a pack-mule. The female condition was too raw a subject for a male: he thought S. Sultan Farouqi was a man, my sow a mask for a prostitute. Hindu readers, he remarked, would think I was writing about the lowest castes. My Suwwariya was abused by pigs and men alike. I decided then to use my own name: after that I would always sign my fictions Saadia Sultan. An Urdu women's magazine, the best known in Delhi, whose editor was a family friend and had published some of my essays, rejected it outright.

'It'll be banned,' he said, 'for obscenity. Particularly if the writer is known to be a woman. Why not keep to your initials and send it to one of the progressive journals?'

The third editor I sent it to accepted it. He sent it back to me with some minor amendments and a series of delicate line drawings of fields, piglets and farmers. The pictures gave my story an innocent touch, underlined the elements I'd deliberately used and subverted, of a children's fable. I thought that effective. But the publisher ran the story without the drawings: too many pigs for Muslim sensibilities, he finally decided. The story got some attention. It wasn't banned, though some people did think it obscene, particularly from the pen of a woman. I wanted to know who'd done the drawings the publisher had rejected. Someone told me it was Rafi. The popular young writer — whose debonair manner boys envied or emulated, whose photograph on the back jacket of his book set college girls swooning as a movie star's would, whose voice on the radio programme for which he occasionally read his stories and reviewed current fiction kept housewives awake all night — was also adept with pen and ink and sketchpad.

I wrote more stories. It seemed, somehow, the next step, to turn my concerns into sharp little fictions. I wrote of characters and situations I knew. A tourist guide at the Taj who refuses a large tip. A shoeshine boy. A doctor accused of malpractice. A widow whose in-laws abuse

and disinherit her after kidnapping her son. A girl forbidden to marry because her suitor is the grandson of a launderess. The only difference between my essays and my tales was of tone: in the former I'd used irony and sarcasm to talk about social ills, in the latter I devised labyrinthine plots and coincidences to illustrate those ills and make them cohere as stories. My plotting must have owed something to the three-day story cycles I'd grown up listening to.

There was another story I added, as an afterthought, because my publisher told me my collection was too short and I also wanted another tale about an animal. I wrote down, as I remembered it, a story my mother used to tell: a man has a pet peacock in his garden. He ties it up in a bag and feeds it through a hole. Every now and then the master asks, 'Are you comfortable?' And the peacock replies,

'I am.' Then the rains come and with them a flock of peacocks. When the peacock in the bag hears the rain and the cries of his companions he, too, begins to cry, to want to feel the raindrops on his feathers and spread his wings, to fly to the top of a tree. He begs his master to let him go. I framed the tale with the exchanges of a child who wants a peacock as a pet with her mother who tells her the tale to dissuade her. I called it 'Thirst'.

Rafi reviewed my book on his radio programme. He was disdainful about most of the stories. The sound of coins dropping into the palms of the poor jangled too hard in his ears, he said, and the garments of my hapless heroines smelt of camphor. 'Men there was the too-comfortable moisture of womanly tearstains on my sleeve, and the pointing finger of my well-bred distance from my material. In my sketches — he called them that — I wasn't yet a storyteller: the reformer's zeal was too present in my work. But the fables he liked: the sow and her destiny, the peacock's longing.

'The lady should be writing for children:' he said. There was a dearth in Urdu of serious stories for children. (Ah yes, there was another story he liked, the prose poem I wrote in my own voice, about the pain of giving birth, to a child born dead.)

I wanted to meet him, I sent him the draft of a long story I stayed awake to write one night till the sun came up, of a princess who falls in love with a horse. When the horse elopes with her maid she follows them to the Land of Darkness to take her revenge. Rafi sent back the 100 pages with a few pencilled amendments and seven beautiful sketches. The book came out the next year. It was read with alacrity by children and adults alike. The rumour went around that I'd allowed Rafi to rewrite the story. But by then he was my best friend.

5

In any exchange of letters there's a writer and a reader: this is invariable. It's hard to explain. I have something to say, to impart, to confess. You listen. And sometimes you, too, start singing, your triumphs and your failures and your little tribulations. But you could be saying all this to anyone. You're writing to make me write, that's all. Between my letters, waiting for yours to arrive so I can write again, I don't sleep, I walk around the silent house in darkness, I write and erase, erase and write. When I write, it's only to you. I live my day for you, my sleepless nights for my letters. I walk barefoot on the wet grass at dawn and see the gaudy green of parakeet wings weave patterns among the tender green of leaves.

A dove in a niche looks like a painted miniature by Mansour. A passerby kicks a puppy in a lane: it runs screaming to its mother's teat and for the first time ever I want to touch, to caress a dog, I string my words, one by one, on a thread, string fresh jasmine buds and tuberose on it too, and then I count your words of response, one by one, like the amber beads of my rosary, my friend, my friend, my friend, 33 and then 33 and 33 again.

6

He wrote to me about his childhood when I told him which my favourites were among his stories, how well he wrote about children at play. His stories were a map of India undivided: he wandered around, from his native place in some unknown district near Peshawar to Delhi and back, from North to South and North again, Madras to Kashmir, Karachi to Dehra Dun, sometimes travelling for days to reach wherever his parents were posted from the boarding school in Lahore at which he spent the academic year, I, some years older, spent my early years staying in one place, a little estate — on the border of UP and MP. I was happy too. The youngest child but one, I studied at home: my father taught me Persian and some Arabic, from my mother I learnt Urdu, from an old instructress the Quran. Maths I acquired from my brother. I had no skills with the needle. My father taught at Gwalior, biggest town nearby and only came home on weekends. In the holiday season we travelled around our region to visit our relatives, saw its lakes and rivers, dry land and flat land and sandy stretches and rocks and grassy hills, and always, in their huts, the poor with their cataracted eyes and their sores.

I married Siddiq Saheb when I was 17 because they said he'd let me study, I was bony, dark and tall and not very pretty; I loved books more than the accepted womanly pursuits. Dr Siddiq Ahmed Khan belonged to a scholarly family from Bhopal, but had moved to Aligarh as a student, and then to Delhi to work in the new university; a steady, silent man, 18 years older than me and a childless widower, he wasn't given much to speculation or reverie. In a way, he became another of my teachers. I'd started to write before we married but in our early years together, he'd suggest a subject for an essay, correct the odd ungainly phrase, and always tell me: 'Your writing is your own. Guard it.'

He'd show my work to his friends and, when the time came, send it out to publishers. We had no children except that one little girl who was born dead. Reading became my harbour. Siddiq was a professor of History and Arabic. I taught, too: children from all over our little campus came to me to learn Arabic, Persian and Urdu. I tried to teach the children of the poor along with my students but too often they'd escape me. In the afternoons, when Siddiq Saheb gave his lectures to 40 or 50 students, I wrote; once a week I tried to learn to play the sitar, but since I had no great talent as a musician, I took painting lessons instead and was soon producing passable imitations of Abdurrahman Chughtai. In the evenings, I read philosophy, history, logic, I had little time in those years for stories. At 22 I wrote the book for which scholars of today remember me: a commentary on the writings of the 18th-century philosopher Shah Waliullah and his doctrine of man's twin nature, angel and beast; his constant search for an accord between the two. My book was an amplification of the dissertation for which, studying privately, I was awarded my degree. Critics said, of course, that my husband had written it: he hadn't corrected a word, though at times he'd told me where to fill in gaps. He would always be my finest editor, never a co-writer. (I didn't write another critical work until much later, my work on Iqbal and his images of the Fallen Angel which won me a prize, but by then I was a professor and rarely wrote fiction, except for children; I was in another city, India was a reborn nation, and all the ones I loved best were gone.)

It was after the book about Shah Waliullah was published that I turned to writing essays — comic, acerbic, satirical. I used what some might call my woman's eye, though until much later I withheld my first name, keeping only its androgynous first letter, so that I could publish in women's journals as well as men's.

Rafi's entrance into my life made me restless. A bold wind would fill my sails and I'd my word-boats would cross white waters and black. What didn't go into stories went into letters, but more often the letters went into stories. Rafi and I always wrote in ways that remained unlike but I feel that if he inspired me I, too, encouraged him. Ridding ourselves of our mannerisms, we found our voices, in counterpoint. As the stormy clouds of social evil which had overcast the skies of my stories dispersed to show the occasional fragment of blue, some light fell on a long and unknown road and I came closer and closer to ground truths, dust truths, earth truths. Rafi, in contrast, wrote air, wrote light. But how can we live without those?

7

Rashida Zafar. Asrarulhaq Majaz. Our contemporaries, the ones who died young. The boldest and the bravest of us. They were both, unlike you and me, on the far Left. I remember Rashida best, who was four years older than I was: I'd meet her at the occasional gathering of the Progressive Writers Association, which Siddiq Saheb and I attended. (Siddiq Saheb and I, fellow-travellers, never could drag Rafi to them. The Lefties don't think I'm a real writer, he'd say; too bourgeois, I am, and I don't drone on about despair.)

Rashida told me once that she'd admired my story about the sow. The rest of what I wrote was for housewives, the 'equivalent of making and breaking old gold jewellery and resetting lustreless stones. She was an activist, not an intellectual: she didn't have time for thinkers, with the exception of Marx and Freud. She was a doctor and a Communist and didn't believe in God. I don't think she'd have had time for my literary essays either. Her stories were of the sort Rafi hated, rocky and muddy. But for all their focus on women's bodily secretions he would never have found in them the stains of genteel tears.

Rashida died young, of cancer. It was anger, not grief, that made her write. Majaz, the firebrand anarchist poet, wrote out of fury too, about our cities and their desolate streets, our yellow dead moon like a priest's turban or the blush of youth on a widow's cheek. He died before dawn, a tramp drunk on a dustheap, on one of those mean streets which he'd written about in that long poem that became the anthem of our generation. He was about 30. His fury was always intertwined with sorrow. He was one of those born to sorrow. As you were born to happiness.

Who causes us more pain? Those who, like Majaz, leave us grieving because they turn their youth into gunpowder? Or those who drive themselves in service of some greater good and are taken away too young by disease? Or those, like you, who leave a trail of happiness, behind them like the scent of jasmine blossoms, and then disappear, one day, petals scattered on the wind? I'm using the clichés of the traditional poetry I could never write. (You, though you mocked it so adroitly, could spin reams of it impromptu in the rhythm and metre of the classics; you'd parrot the bombastic couplets of the reformists like Hali, parody the fragmented non-verse of a modernist like Majaz. You loved Mir and Dard and Zauq and Iqbal as much as you loved anything that had ever been written or recited. I still have the annotated edition of Ghalib's complete poems you left at my door before you went away.)