

King Buzzard*

Bano Qudsia†

TRANSLATED BY *Masood A. Raja*‡

Translator's Note

Bano Qudsia is, without a doubt, one of the leading figures of post-Partition Urdu literature in Pakistan. In her long career, she has published about thirty major works of fiction and many of her plays have been produced to critical acclaim for Pakistan television. Yet, despite her fame and accomplishments in Urdu literary circles, she remains unknown in the metropolitan cultures both in academia and in the popular realm due to a lack of English translations of her work. Published in 1981, *Raja Gidh*, her most important novel, was an instant success and received wide critical acclaim both in India and Pakistan. The purpose of this brief translated excerpt is to introduce the English-speaking readership to the richness and sophistication of Bano Qudsia's craft. It is almost impossible to

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† Bano Qudsia (1928-2017), a.k.a. Bano Aapa, was a prominent Pakistani writer known for her novel *Raja Gidh*. She earned a Masters in Urdu literature from Government College University in 1981 and lived in Lahore, Pakistan.

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convey the true beauty of her work and especially her mastery of Urdu idiom in English, but this attempt, imperfect as it may be, will be fruitful if it is able to at least introduce Qudsia's work to an English-speaking audience.

Raja Gidh, like all of Qudsia's work, is a complex novel. The novel's primary diegesis concerns the struggles of its main character, Qayum, while its secondary diegesis deals with the expulsion of the buzzards from the kingdom of birds. Thus, while Qayum goes through various stages of self-seeking in the main plot, the secondary plot provides the details of the trial of the King Buzzard. The main plot of the novel seeks to unravel the mystery of human madness. Qudsia suggests that there are two kinds of human madness: the constructive and the destructive, and it is the wisdom to know the difference between the two that makes one fully human. The main plot thus, through the interaction of its characters, charts the various reasons for human madness: unrequited love, unending search, fear of death, and so on.

The novel also deals with the question of right and wrong in terms of how we earn our living. Qudsia posits the idea that what we feed our children determines to some extent what kind of people they turn out to be. So, if the parents earn their living through corrupt means, the children end up paying the price. This concept was the main reason that the novel was selected to be one of the texts required for the Pakistani civil service exam. An aspect of the novel that garnered a lot of criticism is its treatment of human sexuality. For Urdu readers, Qudsia's exploration of human sexuality and its connection with human nature and spirit was quite shocking at first, but it is never used gratuitously and ultimately is seen as a component of the development of a spiritual self.

The following excerpts are intended to introduce Qudsia's work to a wider readership. I have tried to stay as close as possible to the original text and have only strayed from it at times to make the reading more accessible to the English-language reader.

Part One
Evening

Unrequited Love

It was an October day—large, fluffy, and white like fresh popcorn. The previous few days had been as hot as a kiln, but this particular day was cool, expansive, and huge. Some days have the capacity to defy clocks and move at their own pace. It was the first day of our Masters class in sociology. The girls sat in the front row. *She was the best of those Chulistani gazelles.* Professor Suhail looked at her and said: ‘Please introduce yourself.’ We had all been speculating about her name, since the day of registration. She rose, rested her hand on her chair like a biker leaning against a motorcycle, and said:

‘Sir, my name is Seemi Shah; I graduated from Kinniard College with a Bachelors in psychology and history.’

These were the first formal introductions. Farzana, Angela, Tayyiba, and Kausar had already introduced themselves. The first three came across as the kind of girls who had obtained their degrees by cramming pulp notes, and whose general knowledge and academic potential was mostly bookish. But Kausar Habib and Seemi Shah were the eyes of our class: glittering, bright, enticing. Kausar Habib, however, hesitated after impressing you; she would concede right when she was about to conquer. Her body and mind flickered like a light with intermittent power flow.

But Seemi Shah?

Well, she was a product of Gulberg’s suburban society. This particular day she was clad in tight jeans and a white cotton *kurta*.¹ A necklace hung from her neck, touching her midriff. She had a canvas bag on her shoulder, which probably contained some money, lipstick, a tissue, a diary with certain phone numbers and people’s birthdays inscribed in it. She probably also had a few expensive pens, which were useless for want of ink, so she borrowed others’ ball-points to take her notes. Her hair was reddish black, and was ablaze on this glorious October day. She was sitting immedi-

ately in front of me, so close that, had I dared, I could have reached out and touched her finely tended hair, but the view of her bodice and her bra straps through her thin *kurta* terrified me far more than a loaded gun ever could have.

Aftab was the first in the boy's row to introduce himself after Seemi Shah. He stood up slowly, a replica of American film icons, illuminating, rhythmic, warm. He spoke in a baritone: 'I am Aftab Batt, and, as you already know, I am a graduate of this very college.'

Professor Suhail removed his glasses and said: 'Well, your classmates don't.'

On this Aftab first looked at the girl's row, then whirled to the boys like a discus thrower and said: 'I was the president of the student union last year; my majors were psychology and sociology. If I had not been so in love with myself and the movies, I could have probably topped the Bachelors exams. But I am not doleful about it. In fact, the girl who got the first position borrowed my notes to study. My reputation, however, is thankfully intact through God's grace and my fear of my parents.'

The whole class laughed. Someone yelled: 'Self trumpeter! Self trumpeter!'

Introductions continued. After five girls and fifteen boys had introduced themselves, the classroom air became musty with details of names and personal biographies. The class could have ended there, as people had started yawning, but Professor Suhail rose and picked up a piece of chalk from the table. He drew a large-headed, heavily moustached, thin-torsoed, big-booted figure on the board. Then he adorned this figure with square-framed glasses, gave him outstretched beseeching arms, and wrote beneath it: Dr Suhail; I will be teaching you sociology.

This comic-figure-drawing professor was only about five to six years older than us, but had the mastery of a lion trainer with a training whip hidden somewhere. He never mastered the functional aspects of teaching, but he was a master at mental judo. Ideological wrestling was his favourite sport, and he loved opening his students' skulls, and was good at closing them immediately if he found them vacant. He was also skilful at making the taciturn ones speak like

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parrots, while silencing the ones who went on incessantly like the radio. He spoke freely and encouraged freedom. Nothing shocked him. He knew a lot more than just sociology; in his presence, therefore, the air was free of academic pretensions and the students never stereotyped each other.

After drawing his self-portrait, Professor Suhail, while massaging the back of his neck, perched on the edge of the desk and said: 'I am not much older or more experienced than you, but as I am a Bachelor, books are still my first love. Books, so far, have been my main passion. You will certainly ask me some questions the answers to which I will not know. Unfortunately, I am too proud to accept anyone else's intellectual superiority. I therefore warn you that for as long as you are in my class, you should consider me your guru. You may not make much of my knowledge; it could sometimes be quite superficial. You might know more than me, but reminding me of my ignorance will be seriously harmful. It will cause my chest to constrict, I will shave off my whiskers, and my belt might become loose. Who would want me to suffer from such a drastic inferiority complex, raise your hand.'

No one raised a hand except Aftab.

'Why would you want me to suffer from an inferiority complex, Mr Aftab?'

'Sir, I think you already have an inferiority complex, so our saying so does not matter at all,' replied Aftab.

The whole class laughed, including Professor Suhail, who laughed the loudest. At this point an invisible triangle was drawn across the classroom space: Aftab held one point, Seemi the other, and Professor Suhail stood at the intercepting point of their gaze. Energy flowed amongst these three like the current through a circuit.

As the laughter subsided, Professor Suhail continued: 'I own an old motorcycle. If any male student needs it, just ask me for the keys. But whosoever does not return the bike at the promised time will forfeit the right to use it again. If a female student hails me at the bus stop for a lift, I will oblige, but would ask her to get off the

bike the moment she tries to tell me where to turn. Now you all can report what you have to share with others.'

'Pen,' said someone from one corner.

'Bicycle, sometimes.'

'Tissues, always.'

'Notes, after the exams.'

'Lipstick,' said Seemi Shah.

'Flying kiss,' replied Aftab.

'Good, very good,' said Professor Suhail. 'Now we know that the GNP² of our sociology class is quite lofty, we can move on with aplomb. By the way, what do you think of the relation between the individual and society? Individual freedom is important, but do you think the society can survive if absolved of all its responsibilities?'

The professor's face had suddenly turned as old as his bike: the lecture had commenced.

Professor Suhail was expertly discussing the relationship between the individual and society. He often hit the ball into our court, which we returned using our best intellectual strokes. Pretty soon faces turned crimson, voices became intense, hands started chopping the air, and the girls, who until recently seemed to have been busy in a silent prayer, transformed into a group slashing at an ice slab with pikes. The conversation left the individual and society and ranged far and wide. We compared Sweden, Thailand, Rhodesia, Mexico, and Uganda, sometimes contemplating the powerlessness of individuals, or worrying over the plight of various societies.

Then Seemi Shah asked: 'Sir, do you think in an ideal society a person would commit suicide?'

The professor ran his fingers through his thick hair, and then threw the question back at the boys. Having found no useful comment he replied: 'In fact, suicide is a symptom. If one were to gauge a society with a social barometer, suicide would occur at its highest degree of pressure. But I am sorry to say, Miss Shah, that there is no such research community as yet in which we can perform this experiment. But it is believed that societal pressure causes madness,

and madness becomes a cause of suicide.’ He then went on to expound on Durkheim for quite some time.

We were all at an age when one develops a romantic and spiritual fondness for suicide. We argued about various causes of suicide: economic, social, individual, personal, and essential. As suicide was the effect and not the cause, the conversation soon shifted to mental ailments and insanity. We all agreed that insanity was the real cause of suicide; it was madness that impelled humans to take that last drastic step.

Angela had been silent throughout the discussion, while Farzana, Tayyiba, and Kausar, who had been previously arguing vehemently with Professor Suhail, went suddenly mute when the discussion turned to the cause instead of the effect.

Professor Suhail concluded: ‘You all have clearly understood the relationship between the individual and the society and have drawn quite apt conclusions. Ms Farzana is right in suggesting that when the noose of society becomes overly tight around the individual’s neck, the individual takes the tragic step of ending life before the time of natural death. Kausar has explained the reasons for suicide with the freshness of a true discovery. But now I invite you to contemplate beyond the act of suicide, which you all agree is the ultimate outcome of madness. Think about this aspect, not the suicide itself, but about madness; not the effect, but the cause. What is the real cause of madness? Remember, if madness is so baffling, then its cause must be even more extraordinary.’

Now, the boys jumped into the fray.

One suggested: ‘There can be two reasons for madness: functional, caused by a birth defect, and psychological.’

‘Look deeply for any reasons besides this,’ said Professor Suhail.

Aftab had not said a word until then. This Kashmiri boy had remained seated like a decorated birthday gift in its white wrappings. We learned later that when it came to academic discussions, he never wasted words: where a smile sufficed, he would avoid using a word, and if a word was enough, he would not waste a sentence, and he preferred brevity over prolixity. He usually spoke in points. He would count his responses on his fingers, one, two, three. He rarely

crossed number three; but what he said this day was probably his longest articulation during his entire Masters career.

He rose and stretched his hands outwards like a cross. His arms were covered with hair, like thick golden grass. The light from the window struck his brown eyes and made them sparkle like glittering honey. He looked like an athlete carrying the Olympic torch: beautiful, pure, hallowed. It was at this moment that Seemi made the mistake of looking at him, and was driven mad.

‘Madness is caused by unfulfilled desires, sir,’ he said. ‘These desires,’ he continued ‘are caused by the social taboos present in every culture. In the cultures where one can’t marry one’s cousins, the unrequited love of one’s cousin becomes the cause of insanity.’

‘Thank you for borrowing from Freud,’ Seemi slashed at him in her scissor-like English.

‘*Madam*, I have not borrowed this from the Repression Theory; I am speaking of Mir Taqi Mir’s³ madness, Farhad’s madness.⁴ Professor Suhail exposed us to one aspect of madness: suicide and death. I am speaking of the other side of lunacy; the kind of madness that is divine, sacred; the kind of madness that drives one to conquer Mount Everest, or dig a canal of milk.’⁵

‘Sit down Farhad *sahib*,’ yelled a boy from one corner. Aftab gave him a fiery look and sat down.

‘That’s a point,’ said Professor Suhail, his eyes suddenly luminous. ‘So, we have reached a conclusion’ he continued, ‘that madness has two kinds, positive and negative. Good, very good. Now, your assignment for this month is to share with me at least one reason for human madness. This reason cannot only be biological, or environmental; it should be completely innovative; it could be some spiritual or mystical idea, but new. The one who comes up with the most insane answer will get the most points.’

The class was in turmoil.

‘Madness is caused by only one thing: environment, environment...’ said someone from a corner.

‘No, it’s biological...’ yelled another.

‘Repression, sir...’

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‘Agree or disagree, but madness is caused by only one thing: *Ishq-e-lahaasi!* Unrequited love, unrequited love, unrequited love,’ shouted Aftab, while standing on his chair.

‘Order! Order,’ roared Professor Suhail. ‘Friends, my pay increment is at stake here; if you make such a racket, someone will report me to the chancellor, and I will be posted to Muzaffargarh.’

The discussion soon became a rudderless ship. One student talked about group marriages and use of hashish, then someone mentioned the Western moral decay and the race problem. Everything became worth a shot: the North African refugee problem in Sweden, Red Indians and their shamans, colonialism and the problems of democracy, Japan’s industrial excellence, the ever-unravelling Russian communism *etc., etc.* But Seemi Shah was speechless—she had been vanquished by Aftab’s idea of unrequited love.

She was a flower of Gulberg; she had studied at Convent schools. In her free time she enjoyed Western music, read *Newsweek* and *Time*, watched American TV shows. Her wardrobe included only a few Shalwar *kurtas*; for her looks, she relied on shampoo, hair spray, colognes, and perfumes. She had never had to wash herself using a mug and a bucket of water; this back-brush-wielding, shower-using daughter of Gulberg was smitten by the inner-city Kashmiri boy, exactly when he was busy announcing: ‘*Ishq-e-lahaasi!* Unrequited love! Unrequited love!’

They had previously exchanged some surreptitious looks. But during this third period, their eyes first became filled with wonder, and then with recognition and finally with understanding. After the class, they both rose in a trance, and, as if under a spell, exited the classroom side by side. Outside, Seemi quietly mounted Aftab’s motorcycle. Aftab never raised an eyebrow. Like in a movie scene, they both slowly faded out on the road.

Three people jolted my being on this day. Aftab, with his Hellenic bearing, was one of them. If he had not been in the class, then probably I could have been the most popular in the class. This induced a special jealousy and ill-will in my heart for him.

The second shock came from Professor Suhail. Previously, I had been accustomed to professors who taught from textbook notes. They all had been teaching from these notes from the beginning of their careers and would probably retire with the same knowledge; there was no chance of their intellectual growth. They were stuck with the ideas they had started with, and there wasn't much chance for change.

In high school, I was in the care of Master Ghulam Rasul. His beard, his booming voice, and his table were immutable. He carried a cane that he placed on the table the moment he entered the class. His long beard shone with hair colouring. He used to curse us the same way the policemen addressed felons. The volume control in his voice was broken, so he always used the highest notes. As we could not remove his staff, we took our revenge on the table instead. We had carved hundreds of curses on the four legs of the table with our compasses. But, despite our abuse, the table never left the classroom. Master Ghulam Rasul was quite immovable, too. If he declared that the War of Independence had happened in 1647 CE, then so it was, and no reference to venerable history books could change his mind. Because of his influence, his students were mostly cowards, mean, and unkind to the elderly. He could not accept any criticism of the Mughal kings. All of them, from Babar to Bahadur Shah Zafar, were his heroes. Any criticisms of the Mughals incensed him, and as he could not convince us with his arguments, he drowned us out with his loud, booming voice.

In ninth grade I chanced upon *Tuzk-e-Jahangiri*.⁷ I shared the details of the book with my classmates frequently. Knowing master Ghulam Rasul's veneration of the Mughals, but being young and arrogant, and wanting to impress my classmates further, I decided to ask a question. 'Master Jee,' I said, 'have you read *Tuzk-e-Jahangiri*?'

'I read it when you were still pissing in your pants. Sit down and don't try to impress us with your knowledge!' he replied.

'Master Jee,' I ventured again.

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‘There are events recorded in the book suggesting that Jahangir wasn’t all that compassionate.’

Master Ghulam Rasul smashed his chalk on the table.

‘He married Noor Jehan. Isn’t that compassion? Why would a king marry a divorcee? Was there any dearth of virgins? Tell me if this was compassion or not?’ He yelled.

Master and I had two different ways of measuring compassion.

‘Master Jee, he had one criminal immured in a goat skin and then had the skin sewed shut,’ I said.

‘Well, he was a criminal, not an innocent. Punishment is always for good. Now, when I punish you, does it benefit me or you? Punishments are for the good of the felon,’ he roared.

‘But Master Jee, how could the one who got sewn up in a goat skin benefit from the punishment?’

‘Sit down! You argue like your older brother. We will talk about Jahangir the Great when you grow a moustache,’ he concluded.

He always added, like in Alexander the Great, ‘the Great’ to every Mughal king’s name, and as I was always quite shy about my non-existent moustache, I sat down immediately. But that first attempt at showing off my knowledge started a rebellion in my heart.

That most teachers are usually quite conventional in their ideas is the greatest misfortune of the teaching profession. The teachers love discipline, middle class values, and hardworking students. They teach about unusual people and their accomplishments, people who were nonconformists. Hence, being common themselves, the teachers teach about people whose level of thought they themselves don’t possess. They thrive in making children normal, common, while their educational materials incite the students to be unusual, uncommon. The dropouts do not belong in the school, but they are always lectured about the people who themselves were school dropouts. Every Ghulam Rasul tries to teach normatively to students using works about the geniuses of history, and this is the great tragedy of education: the works of special people in the hands of the ordinary. It was because of this disparity in our educational system that I could never grow tall inside, even though outwardly I had

grown taller. Inside, I was like a Bonsai tree, centuries old, yet a pygmy.

I was careful to the point of being impractical. It was all right on an intellectual level, but in real life I was like a lost dog. I needed a guru who could stretch me to make me as tall as him, but I ran into yet another Master Ghulam Rasul after high school.

I met him during the first year of college. Professor Tanvir always smoked imported cigarettes, dressed in spotless three-piece suits, and wore thick power glasses. He was quite erudite, and I was impressed by the depth of his learning. As my early experience was rural, I preferred the feudal system, but he was an ardent socialist. Theoretically, he attributed all social ills to the uneven distribution of wealth. I quite took to him during my first year, but he turned out to be yet another Master Ghulam Rasul. He was only an academic socialist. His lifestyle was completely feudal, and he could not accept any criticism of his views or his lifestyle.

If any student pointed out a disparity in his views and his real life, he denied them the same freedom of speech that he idealised. It was during the week before the final BA exams, when he was proving his open-mindedness by allowing us to smoke in class, that I asked him a question.

‘Sir, there is something I wanted to ask.’

‘Oh, keep smoking, we are friends, and ask your question’ he said.

‘Sir, you tell us every day that capitalism is the root cause of Third World poverty, then why don’t you sell your car and buy a cheap motorcycle?’ I asked. I was young then and did not know of the incongruity between people’s words and deeds.

Professor Tanvir’s face turned red. Restraining his anger he said: ‘This is a totally personal question, sit down. You rural folks lack manners; idiot, if I sell my car then how will I get to college?’

I felt slighted, and could not let go of the discussion. So just to annoy him further, I said: ‘On a bicycle, sir, just like all the other people.’

‘This is the space age, you idiot; time is valuable and you want me to revert to a bike?’

‘But sir, China is in the space age, too, but people there...’

‘You want an intellectual to ride a bike, while the businessmen and mill owners and the nouveau riche travel in their shiny cars? We have carved out a place in this society after years of hard work and struggle and you want us to give it up!’ said Professor Tanvir.

‘But sir, according to your beliefs society should be classless, so there is no fear of losing one’s place.’

Now the professor was foaming at the mouth and he flailed his arms, shouting, ‘Sit down, sit down. A frog’s mind cannot contain Marx’s ideas. First learn how to tie your necktie, then we will talk about these things.’

I hid my necktie behind my palm and sat down. Professor Tanvir did not know how to open minds; he was incapable of providing the kind of education that could reduce the difference between words and deeds.

But Professor Suhail wasn’t like an immutable sealed parchment. He was like a slate: you could write, erase, and write again. I was surprised at his love of books; books had been my passion too for a long time. But the books had driven me away from the lighter side of life; I had learned that those who loved books forgot about the lighter aspects of life, and became serious priests in the habit of hitting others with the staff of their learned ideas.

Professor Suhail was different and interesting. All my life had been scarred by Ghulam Rasuls, so I was fascinated by this childlike, simple, and well-humoured professor. The introductory lesson made me disillusioned about my earlier education. I got bored with Buddha’s *Dhamphada*⁸ and modern parapsychology. I wished to be a simple slate, so that I could erase what had been inscribed on it earlier to write Professor Suhail’s assignments with new insight, according to his expectations. Even though I had not yet started his assignment, I was already afraid of disappointing him.

After succumbing to Aftab’s splendour and Professor Suhail’s learning, my third genuflection was to Seemi Shah. It was probably a victory of urban culture over the rural. I had never before seen such a completely urban girl. She transported me to the world of advertisements, of plane fights through clouds. Her accent, dress,

manners, and smell all revealed that she was more refined. Now, my pride incited me to break her and drag her to my rural home where she would become a complete village girl. So that her days and nights would be spent, like my mother, churning milk, plying the spinning wheel, and cooking vegetables in large earthen pots. Maybe every man desires to force a woman from her own chosen path to a course of his choosing.

But Aftab had already left with Seemi on his motorcycle. At that very instant, he was probably giving her, in Urdu, her first lecture about the history of inner-city Lahore.

Some people say that the region of Potohar, made up of arid, second-rate hills the natives call Pabbian, was once a puissant blue ocean. Then a Yogi, who meditated upon its beaches for three hundred years, taught the ocean to hide. Each wave returned back to the Arabian sea, singing its hymn, *malagan*, *palagan*, laying bare the submerged barren hills. The geological aspects of these hills still reflect the water marks of the ancient ocean.

Some others say that Potohar was once a thick jungle. The trees in this jungle were so tall and thickly intertwined that even the streams running through it got lost, and the sunrays never reached far enough to create multi-coloured whirlpools in their waters. The birds roamed this jungle freely, and even the night owls could see during the day. Then one night a haunting wind descended from the moon and devastated the forest and dried up the streams. This forest thrived centuries ago in the first age of human civilisation, a civilisation that had all the knowledge that we now possess.

It was in this first age that the humans travelled to Mars and Jupiter, and invented atomic bombs. When the bowstring of civilisation was stretched to its limit, the humans destroyed God's world with their bombs and this forest became a wasteland.

This story is of the specific time from the first age of human civilisation when humans had not yet used their bombs. There was great fear amongst the dwelling places of animals about this new

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human innovation. Hence, a conference of the birds was called in the jungle. So many birds came to attend this conference that there wasn't enough room for them to perch.

From Hind Sind came the grey-winged birds in droves. From the hills of Khasi came the red-tailed bulbul and the emerald green pigeon whose orange underwings dazzled the eyes of the beholder. The Bajanga from Kathmandu and the eagles from Tibet arrived, having camped several times during their long flight. Not only the African partridges, moorhens and nightingales made their way to the meeting, but even the birds of prey suspended their activities and flew from America and Australia to the meeting place. Even the Shikra, Baz,⁹ and eagles, residents of Central Asia and Russian Turkestan, reached the meeting in the company of the birds of Pamir. The crow, Mynah,¹⁰ quails, woodpeckers, chakoors,¹¹ and sparrows were natives and their collective votes counted, but their individual opinions were not considered worthy, while the hook-billed, high-flying birds pranced around like the white races. From the basin of the River Gagahr and Chatranji came the latoras, chandols,¹² and goghais¹³ flying magnificently in battle formations like fighter planes. The gold-backs, neelkanths¹⁴ and hudhuds¹⁵ chose the tree stumps as their perches. The doves, cuckoos, and chandols were not much interested in the conference, for them it did not matter much if the humans destroyed the world, and had come just to gossip with the denizens of the forest, but were shocked to learn the seriousness of the situation.

A few days before the conference, the air was filled with the disparate opinions of the birds. Everyone was waiting for the President, without whom the meeting could not commence. The reconnaissance party returned from Mount Everest, reporting that they had combed all the mountains—Dhulidar, Nangaparbat, K2, Kanchnaga—but had found no signs of Huma.¹⁶ It was assumed that the world was awaiting the arrival of some powerful king, and Huma was on a VIP tour to help the forces of the universe choose this king. This supposed tour also became a subject of gossip amongst the birds. Some carnivore birds thought that the end of the world was near, and that it would be brought by human hands. They

thought the world needed a pure being to save it from the disaster, and Huma, instead of choosing the king, was searching for this Messiah. Some other birds thought that Huma had become mystical-minded, and having announced the vice-regency of man to humans, had now given up and become a recluse, for every caliph he chose had become a tyrant instead. Huma, thus, had lost hope in humanity and had vowed not to fly over human heads again.

The Owl Jati, who never interfered in others' business, did not agree with this opinion. They thought that Huma, because of his narcissistic delusions, had never cared about God's will, and he could only guess the desires of a few humans. Therefore, whosoever Huma chose as the king became a downfall for his people. The night owls were more interested in observation than speech, and did not express much and waited patiently for Mr President's arrival.

Even though the Owl Jati leaders had conversed about this within their inner circles, the crows, the inquisitive bastards—an art they had learned from humans—got wind of it. Thus the round-eyed owls' secret was spread to the whole jungle, and the whole jungle resonated with rumours. The crows had always considered Huma a circus clown who had been eternally stubborn and often wrong. Thus, when Huma remained absent for a long time, the birds got tired of waiting. The crows were rightly incensed, for they had long lost the habit of residing in the forest; they were, rather, more accustomed to sitting on the house walls eavesdropping on housewives, and this absence of human contact was troubling them. So, every now and then, a few wise, cunning, and cowardly crows would surround the smaller birds and incite them thusly: 'Huma is an eternal fool who keeps choosing the kings on the earth. Brothers, every human is a king, whether he sleeps in the manger or on a throne. Huma is stupid and does not understand that every human considers himself the Best-of-all-Beings; those who wear the crown of pride, what need is there to make them kings?'

The Peacocks, with their tails spread, kept rehearsing the welcome dance all over the jungle: they were happy for being part of the reception committee. The crows used a different language with

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the peacocks. ‘Huma is a different matter; only he will suit the Presidential chair; nothing can be done without Huma as the president.’

The empty Presidential chair prompted a search for an alternate to Huma. It was discovered that the mountain from where the ocean had receded—where one could still find oyster shells, snails, scorpions, fish skeletons, and the remains of other sea creatures—was the abode of a Simurgh.¹⁷ No one knew of his exact age. Some birds insisted that he had been a refugee on Baba Noah’s ark. Others speculated that he had always lived in the sacred areas—the ones that the Isrælis are now trying to annex—to derive energy from the mosque of Aqsa.¹⁸ The old sea turtles insisted that the Simurgh had lived in the Mediterranean desert, which later was filled with the waters of the Mediterranean ocean.

The Simurgh spent the whole night gazing at the moon to absorb the lunar energy, and spent his days sunbathing in the desert. The dove opined that it was because of Simurgh’s powers that Potohar became a jungle: if the lunar energy had not appeared in the Simurgh, not even a single wave of water would have receded from Potohar. It was the magnetic energy of lunar power that had forced the waters to rise and fall back into the Arabian sea.

The reclusive Simurgh hated the noise, and the company of the denizens of the forest distressed him. He was accustomed to living in the uninhabited lands and eating only what was absolutely necessary to sustain life. But the search party finally found him and having beseeched him in the name of his experience, intelligence, and knowledge convinced him to preside at the conference. Simurgh arrived during the latter part of a full moon night. A few moments before his arrival, the sky was shaken with tree-bending winds. The storm-loving birds rose up to reach the skies, while the timid ones hung helplessly from the tree branches. The lightning struck and the land trembled; the bolts of lightning transformed the night into day. Just as the birds were struck dumb by the ear-shattering noise of thunder and lightning, Simurgh alighted on the fourteen-century old banyan tree. The storm subsided as soon as he took his place on the tree. The forest went quiet and the banyan tree glowed in fluorescent light. As soon as the Simurgh flapped his

wings to accept his new responsibility, the jungle rumbled with a noise like that of thundering cannons, and the birds feared the coming of an earthquake.

‘Why have you called such a huge conference?’ asked the Simurgh.

An aggressive Kite left her group and moved briskly forward to answer the question. ‘Master, we have a serious and complex problem. As you might have noticed, the human of today has become civilised for the first time. He has, with his inventive knowledge, travelled to Mars and Jupiter, but there is also something in human instinct that is a cause of his destruction—madness. It is because of this madness that he has created weapons that can destroy the earth in minutes along with all who live on this sphere. O King of the Birds, we have noticed that some of the birds are also becoming subjects of this madness. We fear that their madness, well, could ultimately become the destruction of the world of birds.’

‘Who is mad, who is mad?’ asked all the birds.

The Kite continued. ‘We don’t care about the details, Master...but no bird has ever gone mad until now. If the birds start going insane like the jackals and the foxes, then what will happen to the life in the jungle...the main point is that this madness, like that of the humans, might destroy the world of the birds.’

‘Who amongst us is mad? Tell, tell!’ cried all the birds.

‘Friends,’ the Kite continued, ‘we don’t want to blame anyone, but these days the Gidh¹⁹ Jati has been known to do strange things. For years we have noticed that they eat to the fullest, vomit, and eat again. And in the moonlit nights, they leave the green forests and run in the arid, barren lands like sailboats running against the winds.’

All the birds suddenly looked at the vultures, who were sitting with their beaks tucked under their wings, like so many amnesiacs.

The kite hissed again: ‘They must be punished, Your Honour, or else we, who resemble them, would be disgraced because of them.’

Simurgh flicked his fluorescent light thrice as an announcement. The whole jungle fell silent. Then he said: ‘This isn’t as simple as you state. First, we need to know if the vulture Jati’s madness is

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really of any danger to the bird community; secondly, we must know the real reason for this madness. If it is essential to their being, then we are helpless, for then it is between them and their maker.

The kites were not interested in discussion; they just desired the banishment of their vulture look-alikes. The eagles and hawks were troubled at this likeness, too, but the kites were hasty and aggressive. The same kite said again, ‘Master, when humans went mad, no one cared about it, and now they are suffering the consequences of it. If we do not pay attention to this today, then the jungle community will vanish from the earth. Our personal grievance is unimportant, we can deal with it, but it is also an issue of everyone’s survival. Don’t you all want to live, to survive?’

The birds were not really interested in a just decision, but the word survival caused an uproar. ‘Expel! Expel! Expel!’ they shouted.

This terrified the dust-coloured finches who had until then sat quietly, disinterested.

The Surkhab,²⁰ as the legal advisor, said the pacifying words: ‘Brothers,’ he said ‘this problem is not as simple as you think. We have all the birds of the world here, so let us decide with a majority vote.’

The jungle reverberated with yet another uproar: ‘Banishment is the punishment for madness: Expulsion! Expulsion!’

A wisened old Kite rose from his group and said: ‘Master, send them to the human world. They are building the bombs that will obliterate all life. When those crazies erase their own seed, let the vultures be a part of it!’

The woodpecker, feeling a surge of compassion, said hesitantly, ‘*Sain*,²¹ all of us birds sometimes visit the human cities, but always return. The humans do impact us but not permanently. But if we banish the vultures completely to the human world then we will be responsible for their sins, for they will certainly learn evil from humans like envy and jealousy.’

The crows interrupted, ‘Where is it written that human company causes envy and jealousy? Human is God’s vice regent, after all. Such talk does not suit us birds.’

The woodpecker, finding the mynah in his favour looked to her and said, ‘Why don’t *you* say something?’

Mynah flapped her wings to gain everybody’s attention, and said: ‘The first human madness happened when Cain killed Abel. The crow saw human helplessness and alighted from the skies to teach Cain how to hide the body of his brother. Look at human pettiness, for they, instead of thanking the crow for his kindness, denigrated him and have always tried to enslave the birds with their intelligence. And when people of Cain feasted, they slaughtered wild animals, eating the meat themselves and throwing the bones everywhere. The dogs and cats, seeing this plenty, left their clans and settled in human habitations; they ate their fill and buried the rest in the sand, became victims of greed. This is a long story, Master, very long ...humans might be the Best-of-all-the-Beings, but we cannot trust them; their company has never been beneficial for birds and animals.

The parrot, being the mynah’s rival, interrupted and said: ‘If human company causes madness, and engenders envy, jealousy, and greed, then how come the donkey isn’t so, even though he is man’s oldest companion?’

Mynah objected, ‘Tell me, how have the humans treated the donkey for all his loyalty, and kind-heartedness? How much is he burdened by the humans, and whenever they need to label someone foolish, they call him a donkey. The humans, when they cannot profit from the milk-giving animals, sell them to the butcher. Let’s not talk about humans, friends, or this discussion will be endless.’

The Kite, alarmed at this turn of the argument, interrupted and said, ‘It is pointless to discuss the profit and loss of the case. Sentence and expel! Sentence and expel!’

The Cuckoo implored, ‘Think, Justices. The Vulture will never return from the land of humans. We have an old relationship with the vultures; they have lived here in the same trees with us; how would they reform and rehabilitate in the company of men? How will it cure them?’

‘You worry about the cure,’ interrupted the Kite, ‘we are worried that this madness will infect the whole forest. Then what will we

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do?’ The kites did not care about the discussion; they just wanted to hear the sentence.

But all the birds, having heard the Cuckoo’s words, sat musing, with their neck outstretched.

Seeing this, the quick-eyed Kite spoke again: ‘This discussion has enlightened us partially, but has not allayed our fears completely. We demand that the Vulture nation be excommunicated and expelled from the forest. Then, if they want to relate with the fishes or the humans, it is up to them; they will not be considered a part of the world of birds.’

Upon this, the black stork rose and, while standing on one leg, said: ‘It’s not my place to speak in the company of such worthies, but will it be odd to ask the vulture to speak?’

The fluorescent light flickered thrice, and the Simurgh asked: ‘Raja Gidh,²² what say you? Do you admit that you are unlike other birds? Do you suffer from fits of madness?’

Raja Gidh alighted from the tree branches and ambled forward to speak: ‘Yes, Master. On the moonlit nights, I fall off tall, canopied trees. I lose self-control. I do not recognise my own kin. Then I wander on paths that lead nowhere.’

‘Why are you compelled to act like this? No other bird suffers from such insanity.’

‘He has confessed! Confessed!’ yelled the kite group. ‘When the foxes howl in the agony of madness,’ continued Raja Gidh ‘we lose ourselves, Master...we do not understand this madness. We know we are guilty, but what causes this, we do not know. We will be thankful if someone could enlighten us about it.’

Upon this the Najdi bulbul spoke, ‘Friends, I am an inhabitant of deserts, my throat is imbued with the songs of the caravans, and my chest is crimson with the blood of human love. I have witnessed humans for centuries, and I can tell you that the cause of Vulture’s madness can be traced to human insanity. Human madness resides in an energy, which if stemmed can shatter the self to pieces.’

Owl, the most learned of all the birds, was suddenly attentive: ‘What kind of energy? Mechanical energy, atomic energy, electrical energy, potential or kinetic energy, sound or light energy?’

The Bulbul swelled her red chest and said, ‘All these energies combined make the human power.’

Everyone looked at the Bulbul with wide-eyed wonder.

‘Human,’ the Bulbul continued ‘is driven mad because of this very energy. Understand my worthies, when the energy is contained, it breaks the very vessel in which it is trapped.’

‘How do you know? How? How?’ yelled the birds.

‘I am a resident of Najd. When my Sheikh travelled for trade, he carried me with him in a golden cage. Once, a *sanyas*²³ from Benares revealed to me the true cause of human madness.’

‘Tell! Reveal the sealed secret!’

‘The human power lies in sexual energy; unlike animals and the birds, humans do not use this sexual energy for procreation alone. They rather keep this dark steed of energy restrained. This powerful restrained steed of energy helps them in traversing the long distance of the physical and the metaphysical worlds. Those who can control this wild steed attain absolute wisdom, but if they sit loosely in the saddle, then they fall and are called insane. The knowledge of the physical world results in poetry, painting, music, and art. But if the emphasis is metaphysical, and the energy strong, then the humans touch the apex of awareness. If this power is withdrawn, they commit suicide. If the love is unrequited, then the horse drags the rider and humans become insane. People tie them up, stone them for their madness. This unrequited love is the true cause of human madness!’

The phosphorous light flickered thrice, and the Simurgh asked: ‘But what has human madness got to do with the Gidh Jati?’

The Bulbul replied, ‘Knowledge always travels from known to the unknown. Can’t we extrapolate from our knowledge of the human madness to suggest that Raja Gidh probably possess the same power and energy?’

‘You mean the energy of unrequited love?’ asked the Surkhab.

‘Yes, somehow, he seems to have gained the same power.’

‘Under the oath of God-given sustenance, tell us if you possess this energy?’ asked the Simurgh.

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Raja Gidh fluttered his wings and said: ‘Master, I need time; I am not aware of this secret. If you grant me some time, I can consult with my brethren and then apprise you of what we discover.’

Upon this, the Simurgh extinguished the phosphate lamp. The clouds thundered and lightning flashed, the jungle turned fluorescent white. The meeting was adjourned till the next gathering. The birds started leaving in small groups, and the jungle faded out amidst the whispering hisses of snakes.

Notes

- 1 *Kurta*: A loose, cotton shirt worn by men and women in South Asia and around the world.
- 2 *GNP*: The gross national product or gross national income measures a country’s total earnings.
- 3 *Mir Taqi Mir’s madness*: a leading 18th century Urdu poet known for his melancholy tone and themes of madness.
- 4 *Farhad’s madness*: A reference to the Persian poem of Shireen and Farhad, or Khosrow and Shirin in the original by Azerbaijani poet Nizami Ganjavi (1141–1209), in which the lovelorn Farhad descends into madness.
- 5 *Dig a canal of milk*: This is a reference to the Persian love poem of ‘Shireen and Farhad’ in which Farhad is given the impossible task of digging a canal and then filling it with milk in order for him to be able to court Shireen.
- 6 *Sahib*: An honorific Arabic title meaning ‘companion’, roughly equivalent to ‘sir’.
- 7 *Tuzk-e-Jahangiri*: the posthumous autobiography of Mughal emperor Nur al-Din Muhammad Jahangir (1569-1627).
- 8 *Dhammapada*: one of the canonical works of Buddhist scripture, which consists of the Buddha’s sayings.
- 9 *Baz*: the *baz* is a diurnal bird of prey which often appears in traditional Persian literature.
- 10 *Mynab*: also known as a myna, this small bird is a member of the starling family and native to South Asia.
- 11 *Chakoors*: the chukar is partridge native to Asia that is found in India and was introduced in Australia.
- 12 *Chandols*: Bodal chandol is the Punjabi name for the crested lark (*Galerida cristata*) found in northwest India.
- 13 *Goghais*: Likely Jerdon’s babblers (*Chrysomma altirostre*), known in Pakistan’s Sindh province as Jorden Ki Ghoghais.

- 14 *Neelkanth*: the Hindi name of the Indian roller bird, which is considered an auspicious symbol of God.
- 15 *budbuds*: also known as hoopoes, these small birds with a golden crest on their heads appear in the Quran.
- 16 *Huma*: the character is likely named after the mythical Huma bird of Persian literature, one akin to the *Simurgh*.
- 17 *Simurgh*: a mythical bird found in Persian literature as well as Kurdish, Georgian, Armenian, and other cultures.
- 18 *Mosque of Aqsa*: the Al-Aqsa or Qibli Mosque is an important Muslim holy site in the Old City of Jerusalem.
- 19 *Gidb*: the Urdu word for vulture.
- 20 *Surkhab*: a brightly coloured fowl found in Asia, also known as the Chinese golden pheasant (*Chrysolophus pictus*).
- 21 *Sain*: an honorific title signalling one's profound respect for its recipient, also meaning 'teacher'.
- 22 *Raja Gidb*: 'Raja' meaning king in Hindi, this character and the book's title mean 'King Vulture' or 'King Buzzard'.
- 23 *Sanyasi*: A *sannyasi* is a Hindu religious ascetic or holy man who has renounced the world.