

Jaipur Journals

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‘He could be a woman,’ Shonali Sen ventured. The card had been circulated to her and Leila Nafeesi as well.

‘I can never make out if men hate women more, or women themselves,’ Zoya Mankotia said.

‘Purple is a woman’s colour, somehow,’ Geetha Gopalan observed thoughtfully.

‘Oh, please don’t get into these tired gender stereotypes,’ Zoya snapped, her voice combining weariness and anger.

Leila Nafeesi had been quiet all this while. She spread out her fingers to display her long nails, which were painted purple. She had beautiful, pale ivory hands with rings set in silver on all her fingers - lapis lazuli, turquoise, jade, topaz. ‘The colour purple,’ she mused. ‘By the way, I don’t believe someone with such an elegant italic handwriting doesn’t know how to spell - it’s a pose.’

Just then, Didier St Roch came up to the group. ‘Thank you, ladies, for a wonderful panel!’ he exclaimed effusively.

They showed him the card. ‘But this is a monstrosity,’ he reacted agitatedly. ‘Of course you have reported it to the authorities?’

‘We shall ask the festival secretariat to investigate,’ Geetha Gopalan replied. ‘But first let me find the young lady who delivered it to us.’

It was time for the next session. Writers and speakers began shuffling in and out of the room. Words and phrases floated around. ‘Discourses’, ‘the connotation is’, ‘the universal right to asylum’, ‘a war against clichés’.

Zoya Mankotia took the purple envelope and put it purposefully into her handbag. She was humming defiantly

to herself: 'Meri Behene Maange ... Azaadi.' My sisters want freedom, my daughter wants freedom.

She wasn't going to let a poison pen letter bother her. It took a lot more than that to get Zoya Mankotia down.

And yet. And yet. Zoya was accustomed to being misunderstood and disliked and yet the card, patently absurd as it was, had unnerved her by its rancour, by the ill-will that rose like a miasma from the sloping italic handwriting.

As a young girl, she had been ambivalent about boys. She was suspicious and hostile of the way they talked, the way they walked, the way they smelt. As an adolescent growing up in a conservative Indian family, Zoya's behaviour was met with a mixture of exasperation and baffled amusement. She loved her father and her brother, and her engineer father humoured her, but her mother would admonish her. 'When you get married, you will have to respect and care for your husband,' she would say.

Things didn't get any better when they moved to America. Zoya had been a rebellious fourteen year old, and became even more of an outsider in this new environment. She was drawn to girls and constantly in the throes of a new girl crush. Her skin colour and academic accomplishments only added to the constant conflict.

Later, in college, she dated a few Indian men, but their sense of entitlement, their natural arrogance, repulsed her. She didn't come out even to herself until her college days. Her natural misandry gave way to fully-fledged

ideological feminism, a construct that imparted structure and meaning to her life.

Zoya continued to fall in love, passionately and frequently. She wrote fierce poetry after the style of Sappho. She wrote *The Quilt*. The novel was taken seriously in circles that mattered, and received rapturous reviews and accolades within the queer community. She got married, and settled into domesticity with her wife, but continued to fall in love. The contrarian in her was exhilarated by constantly walking against the wind. This purple-penned nonsense should not even have dented her consciousness. But it had.

The burglar wandered here and there, taking in the sights and sounds around him. He had boarded the train to Jaipur with his mind and heart focused on but two goals. One was to meet India's greatest poet, Janab Javed Akhtar. The other was to cover the cost of the trip through some well-executed burglaries, with a margin to spare.

Raju Srivastava was born in Bijnor, the son of an unsuccessful tailor-master. He had worked with his father for a while, and knew the trade. His father had considered it an art; his hemming was more delicate than an ant's tracks, and he would cut the garments with great precision, after feeling and fondling the fabric this way and that, to understand its flow. There were no bulges or creases in the clothes he sewed, and the hand stitching was minute and meticulous. Their fatal flaw was that the garments were always, but always, too tight. Mahinder Master-ji, his father, always cut the cloth too close, leaving no *gunjaish*

or scope for alterations. Raju Srivastava had spent his childhood placating, or trying to placate, angry customers whose clothes did not, could not, fit them. They would threaten father and son, create scenes, and almost always leave without paying.

Mahinder Master-ji would be resignedly philosophical about these episodes, and wear an expression of saintly fortitude. His son Raju would be seething with rage, with his father, with the customer, with the clothes that refused to fit. He took the ignominy of it to heart. The hurled curses were like thunderbolts, the suits and jackets and Nehru-style *bundis* all malevolent conspirators in their constant humiliations.

Raju Srivastava had decided to become a poet. He read them all, Nirala and Dushyant Kumar, Muktibodh and Firaq Gorakhpuri and Faiz Ahmed Faiz. He wrote. His preferred form was the ghazal: seven couplets, with a refrain at the end. He knew the form, he knew the metre. It came to him as naturally as the whirring of the sewing machine and the rhythm of his foot on the pedal.

And here before him was Javed Saheb, the thief of hearts, the legend of the Urdu world. He was explaining the difference between a ghazal, a nazm and a geet. 'A ghazal is like a tin of assorted biscuits,' he said, 'with every *sher*, every two-line couplet, a complete little poem in itself. These are held together, strung together, by virtue of the metre and the rhyme.'

Raju Srivastava listened intently, taking in every single word, every gesture, of his hero. His own *takhallus*, his pen name, was 'Betaab' - the impatient one. And indeed he was

betaab - impatient to get all that he wanted from life, in a hurry to succeed, somehow, anyhow. But in that moment he was not impatient; he had surrendered himself to the magic of Javed Saheb's voice, and to the transformative world of poetry.

The young man beside him looked like a poet too. He was handsome, in a smooth, rich way, with carefully maintained stubble on his chin and thick locks of curly well-conditioned hair that fell artfully over his forehead, adding an air of drama to his studied persona. As the young man leaned forward to listen all the more intently to Javed Sahib's words of wisdom, a wallet fell out of his pocket onto the dusty grass. Raju Srivastava 'Betaab' bent down to pick it up, his motionless eyes carefully scanning the faces around to see if anyone had noticed. He held the wallet in his hand for a while, casually, and waited for the opportune moment to pocket it. But his intuition, his infallible instincts which had let him down only once, told him that he was being watched, and that he would be caught.

He nudged the young man on the knee and handed the wallet back. 'Thank you, bro!' the young man said, and gave him an unexpected hug. Raju recognised the cologne he was wearing. The young man reached into his wallet and took out an embossed visiting card. 'Thanks, bro,' he said again, 'and that's me.'

Betaab was not a pickpocket. He was proud of his craft. He worked alone and took no hostages. The *Indian Express* had referred to him as the capital's nimblest cat burglar. He thought the accolade well deserved. He had no visiting

card to offer in return. ‘*Dost, main shayar hoon,*’ he said in reply. ‘I myself am a poet, and a fan of Javed Saheb. I too write Urdu poetry. My pen name is Betaab.’

‘Arre, Javed-ji is a family friend,’ the young man said casually. ‘That’s why I’m here.’

And now the great poet was reciting some lyric poetry, in Hindustani, and in English translation. It was a long poem, about a village fair.

Fairs

*Clutching his father’s finger,
when a small child
went to the fair for the first time
his innocent bright eyes
looked on a new world.
‘What is this? What is that?’
he asked excitedly.
His father, bending low,
told him the names
of many things, many spectacles;
about the jugglers,
the daredevils,
the conjurors,
and what they did.
Then they turned home.
The child rocked
in the cradle of his father’s arms
and rested his head upon his shoulder.
The father asked,
‘Are you sleepy?’*

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*Time is like a bird
that keeps flying.
The fair returned to the village.
The old father
clutched his son's arm with trembling hands
while the son
explained all he could
about what this was and what that was. s
The father rested his head on his son's shoulder.
The son asked:
'Are you sleepy?'
The father turned,
looked down at the memory lane,
saw the dust kicked up
by moments past,
good ones and bad,
the bitter and the sweet -
and then, turning towards his son,
a faint smile playing on his lips,
said softly,
'Yes! I am sleepy now.'*

The audience broke into deafening applause. Betaab found he was weeping uncontrollably. The poem had unearthed a wound within him which had never healed. The young man next to him was looking at him with concern. The rest of the frenzied crowd took no notice.

His father. He had developed cancer, of the lungs. There was no money for the treatment. Mahinder Master-ji, his papa-ji, looked stricken and shamed by his illness and the

trouble it was causing his family. It was then that Betaab attempted his first burglary. They were in Lucknow, where his father was receiving daily doses of chemotherapy at the Gandhi Memorial Hospital. They were lodged at his father's cousin's house in Qaiserbagh and overstaying their welcome.

Raju targeted a multistorey building in Sitapur Road. It was a new complex, with the residents still moving in. The security guard was a drunken lad from Gorakhpur. Posing as a carpenter, Betaab went to the flats above and below flat 322, and walked around until he could measure each step in the dark. The flat belonged to a lottery vendor, and Raju was reasonably sure there would be cash lying around. The family had gone to see a film at the multiplex, and the helper had stepped down for a beedi and a chat with the guard.

Raju had made a haul of eleven lakhs, all those years ago when a lakh meant something. Before demonitisation or the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax. He had moved his mother into a three-star hotel; she was too startled and afraid to protest. He had rented a small flat for them after that, and hired a decent part-time help. He had done his duty to his parents, and when they died a year later, within weeks of each other, he had donated a lakh of rupees to an orphanage in their memory. Yes, he had done his duty, repaid his debt to Mahinder Master-ji, and his other debts as well. And if Javed Saheb's poem made him cry, it was a testimony to the power of poetry and the vulnerability of the human heart.

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