

**TRANSLATED BY
PROF. AHMAD FARID**

THE BROKEN MIRROR
(Short stories)
BY
LAYAQ ZADA LAYAQ

***How crazy! I'm looking for smiles
In the "Broken Mirror" of life!***

AVOWAL

I am very grateful to
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thoughtless thoughts.
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Layaq Zada Layaq

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The Broken Mirror

Mata Aaina (The Broken Mirror) is Layaq Zada Layaq's collection of Pashto short stories. Layaq Zada Layaq is a prolific writer of world repute. He is a born poet of eminent stature whose prose has all the beauties of poetry.

When I went through these stories, I was deeply moved. These stories present the darker aspects of human life and are very touching in their effect. They highlight the privation of the poverty-stricken masses – how they are oppressed and suppressed and exploited and subjected to social injustice by the affluent sections of the society. Layaq Zada is pained at the sufferings of his people and is using his art for the moral uplift of the society.

These short stories are a satirical portraiture of the contemporary society and are the result of the author's keen observation. They are eye-openers which awaken us to the realities of life. In these stories, Layaq Zada holds up a mirror to our society. He does not believe in sweeping the garbage under the carpet nor is his approach ostrich-like. He believes in facing the truth

squarely. In these stories are hidden our own faces which we easily recognize.

There is no doubt that Layaq's narrative art in these stories is par excellence, his descriptive passages therein are equally fascinating. He has described the vagaries of weather with masterly strokes. His prose style is winsome and his imagery is unrivalled. He has woven these stories with such ease and felicity of diction that they sustain the interest of the readers. He is undoubtedly an original writer who has set a new trend in Pashto literature.

I have ventured to render Layaq Zada's short stories into English for the benefit of those who do not understand Pashto. Any suggestions for the improvement of the English version of these stories will be highly appreciated.

With regards,

Prof. Ahmad Farid

Layaq The Zealot through the Broken Mirror

It is widely acknowledged that a visionary, genius, Poet and the zealot are one; Layaq is an acknowledged enthusiast, he later on came on the world canvas as a poet, a lover of humanity and a genius too. The Broken Mirror reflects his widely acclaimed enthusiasm and love for humanity through many of true-to-life facts of the social life of our people-Pakhtun. Layaq is an accomplished artist to be identified for his Universal vision.

Great credit goes to Prof. M. Fareed that he has successfully let the Pashto face be painted on the English canvas but again Layaq emerges a true artist by being equally successful in the realm of world Literature and a true representative of the young Generation. My critical-Literary study and intellectual honesty urge me to quote one of the representatives of the Modern world-Khurram S- and to quote him, "With each piece of his writings, Layaq Zada Layaq continues to push the boundaries of the class one can witness in the modern literature of our region. Always considered a penman of substance and a scholar par excellence, this time he has carved a masterpiece to decorate

the corridors of the realm of comparative literature studies of English and Pashto.

The Broken Mirror, rendered a Mirror in Pieces truly entitles this collection of short stories. Each piece of this mirror represents a different facet of our multi-dimensional society. This mirror can be called the mirror of our society, a mirror that is beautiful and blunt at the same time, a mirror that reflects beauty but is not afraid of exposing the ugliness, a mirror that is fragile but may end up being hard in certain situations. Each short story in this collection can serve the purpose of a piece of mirror and this book may be called a mirror, a broken mirror, a mirror in pieces.

Besides being an invaluable addition to the treasure of literature, this book will also prove to be a gem for the students of comparative literatures. A perfect blend of Pashtun thoughts with English words, it is an accurate example of diversification. Indeed, this book deserves admiration and its wordsmith, Mr. Layaq Zada Layaq deserves appreciation”.

I feel so happy to see Layaq has gone over to the periphery of the world comparative literature in a very assertive manner that his

writings are capable of securing a niche in the world literature. The Broken Mirror, I'll say the multiple reflections of our society, will attract the modern literate generation and will prove a readers' delight.

Prof. Sajjad Ali Khan

“Shade” of Shades

When I first read Layaq Zada Layaq’s short stories, my initial response was that of a pleasant amazement, as I never came across such stories in Pashto literature.

Layaq is a consummate poet. He has a repertoire of soft and gentle words which he uses skilfully in his poetry. His lyricism can easily be put to music and songs.

The same effect is achieved in his short stories. The narrative sweeps the reader off his feet. He is transformed. As if by some magic, he accompanies the characters in the stories over plains and hills.

Layaq makes the reader feel like his character. The readers cannot sit outside the river of action. They flow with the character.

Layaq depicts nature beautifully. It becomes almost a character in itself. The moon is covered with thick black clouds if the character is in pain. The writer sits on the mountaintop in the story *The Writer*, chanting his poems. He laughs hysterically if there is a storm. Well, we know that the storm outside symbolizes the inside storm of the writer. This is beautiful, indeed.

Layaq creates vivid images throughout his stories. In *Thank God*, he writes, “Her body

was shaking like a leaf, and again her body going limp". At another place, "He moistened his parched lips". These metaphors create pictures in the mind which cannot be forgotten easily. Also, these images enliven the situation, helping in the movement of the story.

The short story The thunder is a great story. Gul Marjana hears the thunderbolt striking the snow-capped peaks. She startles and feels as if the lightning has struck her own heart. Again, marjana stands by her tent gazing at the flitting clouds in the sky. At another place, the thunder struck a mountain peak with a resounding noise and the whole landscape is ablaze. What is it if not poetry? In the Shadow, the moon peeps through the clouds as is a purdah-clad lady bashfully peeps through from behind the door.

Identity Card is another well-knit story. It is full of suspense. Karamay robs his own father unknowingly, and is brought to realize his mistake by his mother. One is reminded of the Greek play wherein Oedipus kills his own father. Coming back to The lightning which is a revealing metaphor, Gul marjana always comes out at midnight and keeps staring at the sky. She wants to understand. But is it possible? The landscape is lit only for seconds

before the darkness returns. She will never understand what is going on in her life. Layaq knows this when he says, “ in the light she would see Agha’s smiling face and, in the darkness, it would disappear”. Life’s complexity and uncertainty is beautifully suggested in this story.

Layaq is a great storyteller. He knows human nature, which makes it easier for him to develop lifelike characters. He knows what to select and what to reject. His aesthetics shows that literature runs in his blood. Pashto literature has found a great storyteller.

Professor Dilshad Khan
Rahatabad Peshawar

The Fairy I remember

Mata Aaina (The Broken Mirror) is a collection of Layaq Zada Layaq's brilliant short stories which has its own individual colour. I first heard the stories of Mata Aaina in the opening ceremony of Abaseen's poetic collection, Alwat, in Dir. The ghosts in these stories transported me to a distant clime – so distant that even its author would have no idea about it. This is why I'm still possessed by his ghosts.

The colour that Layaq Zada has given to the Pashto short story predicts that a new phase is approaching in Pashto fiction. A fresh flower, in the form of Layaq Zada Layaq, has sprouted on the soil of Pashto literature. He is rendering valuable services to Pashto literature through his soulful poetry, his realistic short stories and his national service through radio.

Layaq Zada has preserved the voices of old Pashto singers to form a valuable treasure trove. This is a noble example of national service having no parallel in our history. Whenever I listen to these old singers, I applaud Layaq for his valuable service to literature and society.

Layaq Zada's style in Mata Aaina is new and unique. I extend him my heartiest felicitations on its publication and wish him many more successes in his life.

Regards,
Ajmal

Khattak

,
Akora Khattak, Nowshera

An Honour

Though I hail from the fertile land of Dara Adam Khel, I have spent most of my time in UAE – far away from my motherland. Still I have got great sympathy and profound love for my soil and its people and it will grow with the passage of time.

I developed my taste for literature since my early days. This love and this attachment gave me a good grounding in the essentials of art. I am deeply influenced by Khiyal Muhammad –

one of the greatest artists this century has produced – and when I, through Master Ghulam Ali's son, Arshad Ali, met Layaq Zada Layaq, I felt that I had found what I had been looking for all my life.

However hard I may try, I can't encompass in words Layaq Zada's sublime poetry, his humility, his selflessness and his sincerity. When I read his poetry, I feel as if it is an expression of my own self.

Layaq Zada's poetry represents the contemporary society and the spirit of the age. It is acknowledged as such and admired not only in Khyber Pukhtunkhwa but the entire world.

The Broken Mirror is a collection of Layaq Zada's short stories, which are dominated by his poetic imagination and the readers can see their own reflection in these imaginative stories.

There could be no greater honour for me than the fact that this great intellectual is within the circle of my friends. I pray for the great success of his literary endeavour so that Pashto writers and poets may benefit from them.

I leave you with Layaq Zada's couplet

Let me be grieved; but let me not offend my friends, O dear God, let me not offend a human soul!

Regards
Muhammad Abbas Khan
Sharja, UAE.

My Stories

Whenever I am alone, I close my eyes and go far out in the company of my restless thoughts. I enter a world where I find life singing songs of love and contentment, where the sob of afflicted love shakes heaven and earth, where constraints of time and circumstance are things unknown, nor could there be imagined cruelty and excesses of any kind, where beauties lie ensconced in the

lap of mother Nature, where it is sin even to think of deprivation and frustration. I find myself floating like a speck in this idyllic beauty. Then my crazy thoughts take me farther away – so farther away that I become oblivious of myself. My self and I go in search of each other, and when I move from the state of the subconscious to that of conscious, I stumble and my eyes jerk open – and when I look around, I see flames of cruelty and injustice rising everywhere.

Amidst these flames, the sobs of a restless and helpless soul are heard by the humanity. These sobs of the hearts injured by the cruelty of circumstances reach the depths of my heart too and when I hear the pathetic wailings, the chain of my thoughts is broken and the mirror of my hope falls to the ground and smashes into thousand pieces.

When I look into this smashed mirror and find myself broken into smithereens, I shudder and begin to perspire all over. I pick up my pen with my trembling hand and begin to record my impressions and perceptions. Some call it poetry and some short stories. But I know not the technique either of poetry or short story. I don't know how far I have fulfilled the requirements of the two genres. It will be decided by my readers and the

coming times. All I have done is to make an attempt to put one more flower into the plaits of my mother – Pashto language – and my mind is satisfied with my efforts.

When your name appeared on my lips,
My feelings turned it into a love story.
With love,

Layaq Zada Layaq

Disclamation

All the characters, places and events presented in these short stories are fictitious. If they bear resemblance to a person, place or event, it would be a pure coincidence, for the writer has presented the society in general and not any living person, place or event.

February,
Layaq Zada Layaq

2013.

The Thunders

Gul Marjana's eyes glistened with tears. She was too absorbed in her thoughts to be mindful of the darkness of the night or the rigours of the weather. But whenever she heard a thunderbolt striking the snow-capped peaks, she would startle and feel as if the lightning had struck her own heart.

While she was standing by her tent, the tented village was lit up by the lightning in

the sky and she caught a glimpse of the deserted streets. The streets were quiet but her own mind was disturbed. She looked up at the sky then her eyes drifted to her tent which she could just make out in the dim light of the lantern lit therein.

Her fourteen year old son, Sheen Gul, was sound asleep in spite of the stormy weather but his little sister, Wagma, was still awake. Marjana thoughtfully entered the tent, bent over her daughter and kissed her forehead which was burning hot. Wagma's fever hadn't subsided. Tears rolled down Marjana's cheeks and she began to sob. She wanted to say something to her daughter, but just then lightning struck somewhere in the distance. She wiped her eyes with her grimy, tattered shawl and came out of her tent. While staring at the drifting clouds, she slipped into a reverie.

She recalled how Syed Aga pestered her in her childhood. When he talked of their marriage, she would bashfully say, "Please don't talk about it. Life is so uncertain." Then the D-Day came and she entered Aga's house as his bride. Her great happiness on that day was beyond her imagination.

After their marriage, Aga would leave for his office very early in the morning and Marjana

kept standing in the doorway till he returned late in the evening. While waiting, she desisted from eating and drinking. Aga would say, "Honey, I don't mind eating and drinking in the office. So why should you starve when I'm away?" And she would say, "When you are away, I don't feel like eating." He would beam at her and then both would laugh. After the birth of their son, their love for each other increased manifold.

She recalled the night when Aga came to her gasping and said, "The imperialists have set their unholy feet on our sacred soil. Our motherland needs sacrifice. You tell me what I should do?" Her heart gave a lurch and tears welled up in her eyes; but she put on a brave face and, wiping her tears, said, "Aga, I'm a Pukhtun. The blood of my valiant father is running in my veins. You will find me on your side in your war against the aggressors." He felt relieved. Moistening his lips, he said in a choked voice, "Marjanay, going away from you is unbearable for me, but I have no choice. Sheen and you go to Pakistan with other refugees and don't worry about me. I'll join you soon...very soon." Overcome by emotions, he looked away.

Marjana remembered the day when Aga handed her over to a refugee caravan

bound for Pakistan. She kept her feelings under control but couldn't do so for long and burst into tears. As their caravan started off to the lower Pukhtunkhwa, Aga waved to her. She waved back. Then she cast a parting glance on her motherland. "Goodbye, my beloved, ancestral land," she sobbed. "I commit you to the care of God!"

After a long, perilous journey, she arrived at a refugee camp near Peshawar with her son in her arms. Here, after great struggle and pathetic appeals, she was given a tent and she felt relieved. For her daily rations, she had to hear insulting remarks by the officials, but she bore all this with patience.

Four months after her arrival in the camp, Wagma was born. When she attained the age of three, she began to enquire about her father. Marjana would console her and, at night, before going to bed, she told her stories about her father. Nestled up in her mother's lap, Wagma listened to these stories with rapt attention and would then slip into the valley of sleep thinking about her father. Marjana stood by her tent, gazing at the flitting clouds in the sky. She reminisced about the good old days she had spent in the company of her husband. With hot tears

trickling down her fair face, she got lost in her thoughts and forgot about everything else around her. All of a sudden, someone touched her shoulder and she shuddered. As she turned around, she found Sheen looking at her dreamily. "Why have you come out at this time of the night, sonny?" she said, nervously wiping her tears. He gaped at her. "This is what I want to ask you, mother," he said. "Why do you always come out at midnight and keep staring at the sky? What are you looking for?"

She had no answer to this. The wind had gathered speed. She walked into the tent with deliberate steps, approached her ten year old daughter and sealed her lips on her burning forehead. Sheen knew that his mother was worried because of his sister's illness. He rushed into the tent, picked up his shawl, threw it round his shoulders and, as he was leaving, his mother called out, "Where are you going at this time of the night, sonny?" "I'm going to get medicine for Wagma," he said, looking at her with concern. She let out a deep breath, hugged him and said, "How could you get a doctor at this time of the night?" She looked at Wagma with thoughtful eyes, then turned to Sheen. "You stay here with your sister," she said. "I'll

be back soon.” He wanted to say something, but she hurried out of the room, leaving him bewildered.

Thunder and lightning had become more threatening and now raindrops also began to fall. In the flashes of lightning, she headed for an unknown destination. When she reached the graveyard, she stopped, feeling a strange load on her shoulders. In the light of the thundering clouds, she looked up at the graves. The white and green flags fluttering over them seemed to mock her. She stood transfixed, watching the sight with horror.

Then thunder struck a mountain peak in the distance with resounding noise and the whole landscape was ablaze with blinding light. She saw her husband, who was clad in white, materializing from behind the ensuing darkness and approaching her smilingly. The eerie sight gave her goose pimples. The clouds continued to flash and rumble ominously. In the light, she could see Aga’s smiling face and, in the dark, it would disappear. While she was standing petrified in the storm and rain, she spotted a strange light approaching her. She broke out in cold sweat. The light came closer to her. It was Sheen with a lantern in his hand. He was

distraught. “R-r-return to the tent at once, m-m-mother,” he gasped. “S-s-something has happened to W-w-Wagma!”

Marjana shuddered. She cast a quick glance at the graveyard. Aga had disappeared amidst the howling of the dead. She hurried back to her tent, and as she bent over Wagma, she slowly opened her eyes. “When will dad come, mom?” she asked faintly. Tears began to roll down Marjana’s eyes. She showered kisses on her daughter and as she opened her mouth for answer, she heard Aga’s laughter. She jerked her eyes to the door, but there was no one there. She turned to her daughter, but she had expired....yet her eyes were open as if she was still waiting to meet her dad...

***I was all eyes for you,
But you didn't come!***

The Broken Mirror

It was an evening like any other evening in Lahore. The city was shrouded in a thick sheet of smoke and dust reducing visibility. But the tall minarets of Shahi Masjid were resplendent in the redness of the twilight. Nearby, a group of the faithful was reciting from the Holy Quran. Next to them was a knot sitting around the Imam Sahib, solemnly listening to his post-prayer sermon. Above

the voices of the faithful could be heard laughter emanating from Shahi Mohallah, which lay at a short distance from the Masjid. As the dark pall of the approaching night began to cover the face of the bright day, the peals of laughter and the jingling of anklets gathered momentum. There was nothing surprising about it for Shahi Mohallah was a witness to this phenomenon for ages.

Ever since Zameer Gul came from his village and took lodgings in this locality, he would pass by the red light area with his head bent down. It was after a relentless struggle that he had found a petty job and a small quarter to live in at a short distance from Shahi Mohallah. Though small and unfurnished, whenever Zameer entered this quarter at dusk after hard day's work and lay down in bed, he would feel as if he had fallen into the lap of his mother.

He knew the rules of the game of Shahi Mohallah, but his poverty stood in his way. In his attempt to resist the temptation, he had hung on one wall of his small room the portrait of his lady love and, on the other, he had nailed a mirror in which he would ruefully look at the reflection of his poverty-stricken youth. Whenever the strings of his heart tried to strum in unison with the song

of Shahi Mohallah, he would instantly turn to the image of his beloved. This would bring contrition on him and he, touching his ears, would cry out, "God, help us!" This was his routine for years.

But, today, he felt his heart was sinking. So he finished his work a bit earlier, came to Shahi Mohallah and started roaming its streets. His eye was caught by the flowing tresses of damsels, his heart was drawn to the jingling of their anklets and he marvelled at the fat pimps, soliciting customs. All this gave rise to questions in his mind to which he had no answers.

As darkness began to engulf the city, he returned to his quarter with a heavy heart. He absently opened the door and slumped into his bed under the open sky, forgetting to remove his shoes. The game of hide and seek was going on in the sky and he kept gazing at the flitting stars.

It was past midnight but he kept turning and tossing in his bed. He looked again at the sky where flakes of cloud were chasing each other. He felt as if the whole sky was running. In this helter-skelter, the clouds hugged each other, forming a black cluster over his head. His breathing became hard and his throat

turned dry. He got up, moistened his lips with a few sips of water and, in the pitch dark, left his quarter with a heavy heart. He was so engrossed in his thoughts that he forgot to close the door.

When he returned to his quarter, his heartbeat had risen and his nerves were on breaking point. He mopped his forehead, went to his room and stood before the mirror, but it broke into pieces. He couldn't stand the sight of himself in the shreds lying all over the place. He began to gasp and, in his attempt to seek solace, he turned to the picture of his beloved. But it couldn't face him either and it too dropped to the ground and broke. He approached it with heavy steps and picked it up with his trembling hands. Suddenly a scream of horror escaped his lips, for the picture was soaked in blood...

***The mirror of my thoughts has broken;
How would I now see my face?***

The Shadow

It had been snowing all day and even now the sky was overcast with thick, dark clouds. From time to time, the moon would peep through the dense clouds as if a purdah-clad lady bashfully peeks through from behind the door. It was freezing cold and, in the dim light of the moon, the surrounding mountains seemed to be white giant statues trying to communicate with each other in tranquillity.

As the hours went by, the gentle breeze turned into a violent storm and the thick and dark clouds held themselves into a tight embrace. The landscape was so completely engulfed by darkness that the cold night itself was scared. When the storm started playing havoc with the village, utensils began to fall from niches with a noise heard far and wide. The dogs barked at the sound of the rumbling clouds, but the cold would silence them soon. At times, the noise of the splitting trees and falling walls was also heard in the distance, but neither the storm subsided nor the Nature pitied the lot of those whose huts it was destroying. Soon, raindrops began to fall in the manner tears fall from the eyes of a jilted lover.

On this stormy night, Siala, who was lost in thoughts, stood under the big poplar tree in the vast graveyard. The wind was causing great disturbance among the trees and, at times, it blew the shawl from her face but she would instantly gather it up again and cover up her face with it and would, in the pitch dark, stare vacantly at the black sky. The gale made the trees whine and she felt they were lamenting their helplessness. She heard this lamentation and her eyes welled up with tears of grief.

When the night had advanced, she spotted a mysterious light emerging in the centre of the graveyard. In horror, she kept her eyes glued to the light which remained still for some time and then started moving towards her. Behind the light was trailing a dark shadow. Whereas the storm had scared everyone, the shadow had scared Siala. The light reached the tree and stopped at a short distance from her. The shadow was swaying to and fro like the trees in the storm. She watched all this with held breath. But she couldn't control herself for long and began to sob.

"Who are you?" growled the shadow.

She shuddered. In this bitter cold, her forehead was drenched with cold sweat. "I'm... I'm Siala," she ventured, "Khan Bahadur's daughter..."

The shadow heaved a deep sigh and she felt the warmth of his breath.

"What are you doing here in this storm and rain at this time of the night?" demanded the shadow. She began to perspire all over.

"I have... I have come out for my Gul Bacha," she blurted out.

"Who Gul Bacha? Whose Gul Bacha?" asked the shadow. His tone betrayed his confusion and curiosity.

She didn't want to say anything further but her pain brought out the truth to her lips. Riveting her eyes on the shadow, she told him all the facts...the facts which had so disturbed her, made her feel so guilty. She told him about Gul Bacha who belonged to a poor family and was madly in love with her. When Khan Bahadur's son discovered his love for his sister, he attacked him with a knife on a stormy night like this, cut him into pieces and threw his body into the canal passing through their village. Gul Bacha's murderer couldn't be traced because there was no one to listen to his poor, old father in the village Police Station. Only she knew the truth but she didn't share it with anyone because she didn't want that this murder should bring a bad name to their family.

After the gruesome murder of Gul Bacha, whenever a storm came, she would come out to the graveyard, keep standing under the poplar tree till late at night and would shed tears at the shrine of her unfulfilled aspirations. While talking about the last moments of Gul Bacha's life, she began to sob and when she could no longer control herself, she burst into tears. At this, the sky also began to cry with loud thunderbolts. In the ensuing light, she caught a glimpse of the

shadow. His clothes were torn and the hair on his head and beard were rumped. He was holding a lantern in his one hand and, with the other, he was wiping his tears.

She was dumbstruck at this pathetic sight. Then, regaining her power of speech, she spoke to him, "Baba, you are crying, too?" The shadow wanted to say something but the storm became deafeningly loud and now it was accompanied by heavy downpour. The noise created by the trees splitting and the laughter of the dead became louder and louder. The light began to recede and she saw the shadow trailing behind it. She began to perspire all over and many questions arose in her mind. Reaching the centre of the graveyard, the light remained shining for some time and then went off. With it, the eerie laughter of the dead increased.

The next morning, the villagers found Shamalay Kaka of Bar Cham lying dead on the grave of his young son.

***If sobs couldn't express one's pain,
Oh God, don't make one so helpless!***

Excuse Me Please!

“Maria, I swore many times... I prayed many times... I visited shrines of saints many times, seeking their help... but to no avail. My heart wouldn't relent, wouldn't rest. It would stick to you. How could I forget you? My crazy heart wants you and you alone. When you silently cast your glances on me, my heart leaps up. It is moved to ecstasy and wants to do many things. But I can't do anything. How could I make my heart understand the

difference between your status and mine? You have been born with a silver spoon in your mouth and have been pampered all your life, whereas I have been born in grinding poverty and am leading a life of misery and frustration. I live in a small mud house where one can't even dream of happiness. Though I can't build a palace for you, I have always kept you in the palace of my heart... My sacred love for you inheres in every breath I take and in every drop of my blood that runs in my veins... Whenever I pray to God my tears and sighs always ask for you... I have sacrificed every pleasure, every aspiration of mine for you. I am willing to forgo everything for your and your sake only... Maria, why don't you answer me? Why are you silent? Your silence is killing me. Please say something... Just say that I am yours... Then forget me...forget me for ever... I won't mind it. I request you, Maria... I request you... I fold my hands before you. Look, the dark, ominous shadows of time and situation are after us. I am afraid that...Oh, what is it? I am perspiring all over. My whole body is drenched with sweat! Sing me a lullaby, Maria... Put me to sleep. Put your head on my chest so that I may fall asleep... Yes, like this..."

Saying this, he held Maria's picture close to his heart and closed his eyes. His aspirations and soulful sighs took him deep into the valley of sleep. The lamp was still lit near him. The rain kept changing its mood. It had turned into a mild drizzle now, but when it became violent, he would hear someone running about on the roof. He would shudder and would hold Maria's picture more closely to his heart.

He had been madly in love with her since long and now he missed her very badly. He reminisced about his meeting with her in the moonlit night and what she had said to him. He had wept bitterly that night too. But she never knew about it. Then he remembered her letters wherein she had professed her love for him and had demanded his love. As he heaved a cold sigh, he heard a knock on the door. He opened his eyes, picked up the lamp and came to the door with heavy steps. His face was soaked with tears. The knock was heard again and again. He opened the door and stuck out his head to see, but there was no one out there.

The night was dark and the rain was fast. He stood puzzled in the doorway, looking all around in the faint light of the lamp, but there was not a soul. He closed the

door shut and hadn't reached his room yet when he heard the knock again. This time it was accompanied by Maria's voice. "Hurry up. Open the door. I have got soaked to the skin out in the rain," she pleaded. The ground under his feet slipped and he stood petrified. "You were missing me so bad," she went on. "Now that I have come, you are not opening the door?" He heard her clearly. He was nonplussed. Apprehensions took hold of his mind. The knocking became louder and persistent and it was now accompanied by her sobs.

He picked up the lamp again and made for the door. The rain was now falling with a terrible noise. As he flung the door open, someone smacked him hard in the face. Just then there was lightning in the sky and he caught a glimpse of a shadow laughing. He shuddered and, slamming the door, he rushed back to his room. As he replaced the lamp in the niche, he slumped into his bed and broke out in a cold sweat. He began to gasp. The mysterious shadow kept hovering before his eyes. He could also hear the peals of Maria's laughter. With his trembling hands, he clutched her picture to his heart. "I am scared...Please put me to

sleep...put me to sleep," he mumbled. Then he closed his eyes.

He opened his eyes when he heard a knock on the door. He drew back the curtain from the window and looked out. He saw that the rain had stopped, the night had passed and it was broad daylight. His eyes were red and swollen. He clambered to his feet, stumbled to the door and opened it. There stood the postman who handed him an envelope and moved on.

When he looked at the envelope, his heart lurched. Events of the previous night flashed before his eyes. He opened the envelope with his trembling hands and read the letter. It was from Maria. Among other things, she had written, "Excuse me please!"

The words, "Excuse me please," shook him to the core. He felt as if he was a mendicant whose request for charity is rejected by the rich, saying, "Excuse me please!" Thereupon, tears welled up in his eyes. Memories of the past seemed to him an incomplete dream. He came to his room, picked up Maria's picture and looked at it ruefully. He felt as if it was asking him: "Could gunny patch be put on cambric?"

Identity Card

In the silence of the dark night, the noise of the accident was heard far and wide. People from the surrounding areas rushed to the site of the incident.

First to reach the spot was Karamay. He had no idea of how many corpses and injured lay in the bus, but he could hear the injured moaning, the children screaming and the women wailing. He looked up at the sky which was swathed in the dark pall of clouds, cutting the light of the moon and stars.

He turned the light of his torch on the injured who took it for a ray of hope. But he turned the light off, stalked towards the injured and began to search their pockets. When someone moaned, he would withdraw his hand.

He then turned to an injured who was groaning louder. Taking a deep breath, he began to fumble into his pockets. He found some papers but, in the dark, he couldn't see whether they were bank notes or common papers...and then his eyes fell on his wrist watch, displaying the flitting time. He removed it and slipped it into his pocket. He wanted to relieve the other injured of their belongings too but, in view of the approaching lights, he changed his mind, ducked into the darkness and, by the time the villagers arrived on the scene, he was safely back home.

There was a pin drop silence in his house. He put on the watch, tiptoed into his room and lay down in bed. He tossed and turned in bed and kept calculating the price of the watch. He drew up one plan, then another and then another, but couldn't decide what to do. In this mental conflict, he was overcome by sleep.

In the small hours, his mother got up to say her prayers. When she saw the watch her son was wearing her heart gave a lurch. She rushed to him and shook him and he sat up with a start.

“What is it?” he said, rubbing his eyes.

“Where did you get this from...this watch?” she asked with concern.

“This one? It belongs to my friend,” he said.

“Stop telling lies”, she screamed, running her tongue on her dry lips. “Tell me, where did you get it from?”

He was alarmed. “I...I bought it from Awal Khan of Upper Kalay.”

“Damn you! It’s your father’s watch!”

This exploded a bombshell in his mind and he was stunned. Sleep vanished from his eyes and his mouth turned dry. Gaping at his mother, he took out papers from his pocket with his trembling hands...and then his eyes fell on the blood-stained Identity Card of his father...

***When I look at my blood-stained
yearnings,
I begin to disbelieve my eyes.***

Downcast Eyes

After the death of her mother, Naz Pari would sit silently in a corner in the house of her master, Khan Sahib. Whenever her mistress, Bibi Sahiba, bade her do something, she would get up, do the work silently and then return to her lonely corner. With the passage of time, she reconciled to her grief and, like her mother, braced herself for service to her masters.

Many years went by and when she reached the threshold of adolescence, colours of life began to play hide and seek on her fair, ruddy face. Even when donned in her old, grimy clothes she didn't look like a servant. Her beauty had aroused jealousy among Khan's daughters who would scold her on flimsy pretexts. But Naz Pari would bear all this with great patience for she knew that, in the entire world, this was the only house which had provided her protection.

One day, when Bibi Sahiba went off to attend the wedding of her younger brother, she left Naz Pari to look after the house. This wasn't surprising for she trusted her.

By the time she finished the chores, it was afternoon. From her box, she took out her favourite dress which had been tailored for her on the eve of Eidul Fitar three years ago. She smiled at it and took it to the bathroom to prepare herself for the Zuhar prayers. As, with her eyes closed, she poured water on her body, she began to hum a ditty which she didn't understand. It was probably the expression of her frustration which, while travelling from her unconscious to the conscious, had come to her lips.

All of a sudden, the bathroom door flung open. She gaped and looked wide-eyed for, in

the doorway, stood Khan Sahib, leering at her. She tried to cover herself up and get away, but he slammed the door shut....and when the door opened again, she came out of it with downcast eyes. She shed many a tear in silence, many ideas crossed her mind, but she knew that every thought, every idea would end up in her disgrace, her humiliation.

Thereafter, Naz Pari fell completely silent. Bibi Sahiba asked her time and again but her response was the same – her tears, which continued to flow down her cheeks.

A few days later, when Khan Sahib was returning home after presiding over a jirga, he heard, from a cornfield near his house, someone whispering to his servant, Tor Gul. He stopped short to listen and when the crop began to move, he became curious. He cleared his throat loudly and when he was about to enter the field to investigate, his own daughter emerged from the crop with downcast eyes and dashed to her house...

***If you open the eyes of your conscience,
You'll see your own face in the mirror of
yourself.***

The Shawl

With his head bent down, he stood for some time, thinking deeply. He then raised his head and looked at the ceiling of his mud house where spiders had spun webs. His glances then fell on his hard, rough hands. There were deep slashes on them which seemed to have been made by a sharp knife. His once red white hands had turned jet black by resin. His eyes welled up with tears but he couldn't

decide whether they were tears of joy or sorrow.

His consumptive mother who, having coughed all night, had just fallen asleep, and his teen-aged sister, Gul Jana, had very early left the house with a pitcher on her head to fetch water from the spring.

He thoughtfully looked at his aged mother on whose face the inexorable time had left its deep impressions. Her eyes were closed and her old, tattered scarf had fallen aside, showing strands of her silvery hair. His eyes wandered to the quilt she was wearing whose original colour was lost to the black coat of dirt on it. It had outlived its utility, but it was still very dear to his mother because it was her wedding gift.

Heaving a cold sigh, he walked to the cupboard which was never destined to have a door on it. He took out the copy of the Holy Quran from its top shelf where they had put it long time ago as a mark of respect but had never opened it to read. He kissed the Divine Book and held it close to his eyes for a while. Then he took out the money which he had stashed under it and looked at it with satisfaction. "Not today, but tomorrow," he murmured and then he replaced the money under the Holy Book.

His name was Kashmal Khan, but his poverty had deprived him of his name and turned him into “Kashmalay”. He lived in a tiny hamlet where there were only ten to fifteen houses and a mosque – and this was his entire world. His father used to cut wood and sell it in the village for a pittance with which the family eked out its existence.

On the death of his father, Kashmalay put the axe on his shoulder. When his mother saw this, she burst into tears and hugged her son. She couldn't stand the sight of her young one working the axe with his soft, delicate hands. But they had no choice. Their poverty couldn't give them anything better.

With the passage of time, Kashmalay got used to working with the axe. He would get up very early in the morning, pick up his axe and leave for the jungle where he worked hard all the day long and then, at sundown, trudge back to the village with the heavy faggot on his back. He would sell it there for a meagre amount, keep some of it for his mother's medicines and, with the rest, he would buy daily provisions for the house, which he would carry home tied up in his old, tattered scarf.

On his way, he would stop by the village school and watch the children with keen

interest. When they recited the Holy Quran loudly, he listened to them with his head bent down and his eyes closed and imbibed every word of the Divine Scripture. With his moist eyes, he promised himself, "Next time, I'll start learning from the Imam Sahib how to read the Holy Quran." But his poverty wouldn't let him become a Muslim.

A little ahead of the school was located the bus and tonga stand and opposite it was the imposing shop of a draper to which people from far and wide came in large numbers to buy cloth. While passing by the shop, Kashmalay would, at times, stop here, too, and get lost in the gaudy colours of the cloth being displayed in its showcases. But when he looked at the torn skirt of his old shirt, his mouth would turn dry and he would hurriedly move on. However, for the last few months, he stopped in front of the shop – not for a brief moment, but for a long while - and riveted his eyes on an eye-catching, embroidered shawl hanging on the clothes line in the shop. He saw Gul Jana's reflection in every colour and every strand of this shawl. In his imagination, he would spread this shawl on Gul Jana's head. He would beam at her and his eyes would sparkle with tears of joy. He would kiss her forehead, hold her

close to his heart and say, “Gul Janay, today is the happiest day of my life!” But the honking of the passing vehicles always shook him out of his reverie. He resolved to buy this shawl for his sister. Therefore, for the last few months, he started daily saving some money and hiding it under the Holy Quran. Once he mentioned this to his sister as well, but she smiled and said, “My dear Bhaijaan, please don’t worry about my shawl. You are my shawl. May you live long!” This sent him in raptures. Today, when his sister went out to fetch water, his long-cherished desire rekindled in his heart and he said to himself, “If not today, it will definitely be tomorrow!” Snapping out of his thoughts, he picked up the bundle and returned to the village. Today, it sold for a good price, so he bought medicine for his mother as well as kebab, worth two rupees, for himself. He was very fond of kebab, but his poverty wouldn’t allow him this luxury.

On his way back home, he stopped at the draper’s and eyed the shawl with greater confidence. However, he didn’t touch it for he had no money at the time – but he knew it well that, tomorrow, he would have it.

Back at home, he couldn’t sleep all night. “When Gul Jana wears the shawl,” he

thought, "she might suffer on account of evil eyes or maybe someone would ask for her hand and take her away for good." Such were the apprehensions that agitated his mind. Gul Jana was aware of what was going on in her brother's mind. So she too was awake. He told her, "Gul Janay, do take some sleep." But she said, "How could I sleep when you are so worried about me?"

He got up very early in the morning and put on the clothes he had bought on the eve of Eidul Azha five years ago. He had been wearing them on each Eid but they still looked new. He wore those plastic boots on which his sister had so lovingly stitched colourful pieces. Today, he combed his hair after a long time. Since he didn't have to fetch wood today, he started off for the village at a leisurely pace. Whenever someone met him on the way, he would, without being asked, tell him that he was going to the village on urgent business. From time to time, he would tap his pocket to make sure that the money was still there.

On reaching the village, he made straight for the draper's and, for the first time, touched the shawl. To his hard, rough fingers, it felt very soft. The dealer looked at him from head

to toe but, seeing a look of confidence on his face, he remained silent.

“How much is it?” Kashmalay enquired, pointing to the shawl.

“Twelve hundred rupees,” said the dealer briefly.

The words “twelve hundred rupees” came as a bolt from the blue. He had never imagined that its price would be so high. He stood dazed. He then sat down near the shop and, with his trembling hands, began to count his five months savings. Once or twice he forgot the count, but he kept at it and, finally, succeeded in counting them. The whole lot came to a mere 573 rupees.

He broke into a cold sweat and his mouth turned dry. Then an idea struck his mind. “I’ll provide wood to the dealer on contract and pay up the price of the shawl,” he fondly thought. While doing so, he clean forgot the medicine for his mother and the provisions for the family. He rose with the feeling that the burden of the whole world was on his shoulders and entered the shop again....but the shawl wasn’t there! He was taken aback.

“Where....where is that shawl?” he asked hysterically. But before the dealer could say anything, the honking of a car diverted their attention to the road.

He saw a lady from the upper social strata seated in a sleek car parked alongside the shop. Her face was heavily made up and her head was uncovered. So he turned away his eyes from her. But, the next moment, when he looked up, he was surprised to see the same shawl adorning her head. The thought of his sister flashed across his mind and he turned to the dealer. "Do you have another like that?" he asked meekly. The dealer had seen the five hundred and seventy-three rupees in his hand. "Yes....but for a lump sum," he replied unkindly.

Desperation and pain were writ large on Kashmalay's face but the dealer didn't look at him. He wanted to cry at his poverty and helplessness, but he couldn't do so. He came out of the shop and headed for home.

His mind was so assailed by disturbing thoughts that he became oblivious of the passing vehicles and his village folk. His emotions were boiling over, but he couldn't express them. So he kept walking silently. When he reached the school, he didn't stop. He didn't even listen to the recitation from the Divine Book. Questions began to arise in his mind whose very thought he had earlier considered to be a great sin. He looked up at the sky and began to talk to himself. His

throat had turned dry and when the thought of his sister stood before him like a wall, he screamed like a mad man. His folks couldn't understand him. They didn't know that he was broken inside. When, in this state of mind, he was running across the bazaar, he was knocked down by a passing car. He lay sprawled on the road bleeding profusely. The village folk rushed to his rescue. His face was bathed in blood. The money with which he had so confidently left his house to buy shawl for his sister, was still clutched in his hand.

Two terrified persons rushed out of the car which had hit him. Their faces were white with fear. One of them was the lady on whose head he had seen his cherished desire. She couldn't stand the sight of Kashmalay lying in a pool of blood in the middle of the road. She plucked the shawl from her head and threw it on his gory face. His floundering hope rose again. He couldn't reveal his elation, but he did slowly extend to the lady his trembling hand in which he was still holding rupees five hundred and seventy-three....The village folk looked at one another. He took a deep breath....then he stopped breathing and his warm, flowing blood began to get cold.

When the villagers heaved up his body and set off in a procession, the lady, with her head down, accompanied them.

Back at home, Gul Jana was sitting on a rock near her house waiting anxiously for her brother. When she saw the crowd approaching the hamlet, her heart missed a beat. Grave apprehensions gripped her mind. She went running into the house. Her mother was having a fit of cough and when she told her about the people out there, her mouth turned dry and she began to gasp. Hearing the noise of the crowd, Gul Jana rushed out. The crowd fell silent. She looked at them suspiciously and then her glances fell on the shawl spread out on the cot. She was startled. When she bent down and, with her trembling hands, removed the shawl, she saw the blood-stained face of her brother. "Oh my God!" she screamed. "Who....who did this to you? How....why....?" She began to beat her face, pluck her hair, cry bitterly....but no one consoled her - they were all dumbfounded. When her throat turned dry, she threw her arms around her brother and when her eyes ran dry, she looked again at her brother. It seemed he was saying, "My sweet Gul Janay, why do you worry? Look, I have brought this shawl for you....Take it....Put it on...."

*Destined to have no happiness in life,
“Great crime” of the poor is his poverty.*

The Writer

He had opened his eyes in a milieu where Pukhtun culture was still alive. The water resort was still crowded; Eid and other festive occasions were still celebrated with the same gusto; hide-and-seek and other games were still played in the streets; in hujras, folk songs were still sung to the accompaniment of music; on the entry of an elderly person, everyone in the hujra would

fall silent, the smoke of narghile would disappear in the ceiling and the sound of the guitar would recede, the youngsters would listen to their elders with reverence and would stay silent till the return of their elders.

The village damsels would turn alive the water resort by splashing water at each other amidst sonorous laughter and when they returned home in the evening with their bedraggled clothes, their parents would not chide them nor would their brothers gnash their teeth, for such youthful diversions were the age-old tradition of their village.

There was a large playground on the west side of the village where youngsters played kabaddi in the evening. Young and old would watch their play – with the difference that the young waited for “tomorrow” and the old yearned for “yesterday”. At times, the young folk would start group dance. They would come to the playground dancing all the way. The play would stop; the youngsters would join the dance, the old ones would forget their age and participate in the festivities, and the village lasses and their matrons would also come out to enjoy the spectacle. These were the simple joys of the people which added to the charm of the village.

There were only five to six stone houses of the rich in the village. However, there was not much “distance” between these houses and the mud dwellings of the common people for they all stood together in weal and woe.

He had been born in a mud house. When, passing through infancy and childhood, he stepped on the threshold of adolescence, the traditions and conventions of his village started changing. Water taps were installed in all houses and the water resort became deserted; parlours were constructed and hujras became desolate; youngsters got wise and the elderly came to be considered a load on earth. But he was immune to these changes around him. Memories of the past glories and reminiscences of his early childhood were still alive in his mind and when he started preserving these memories in word form, he came to be known as “The Writer” – the popular writer of natural beauty. He wrote for the common people. This quality of his won him widespread plaudits and he soon came to be known by many people.

Among these many people was one young, comely girl, Ruby, who was his wife’s relative. So he would often go to the city to

meet them. Ruby would always greet him very warmly. He would read out his latest writings to her and, as she acclaimed them, he would feel greatly encouraged. The time rolled on thus.

One day, the Writer composed a fascinating poem, highlighting the simple beauties of his village. He read it to himself again and again, but he wasn't satiated. The thought of it being highly appreciated in a public recital sent him into raptures. Suddenly, the idea of reciting it first to Ruby gripped his mind and he, without giving it second thoughts, set off for the city. When he reached her house he, for the first time, felt hesitant. His heart was pounding and he got lost in his thoughts. Somehow he opened the door and there stood she, all smiles. "I knew you'd come today," she enthused. "My heart told me so...and, you know, Writer Sahib, the heart never tells lies." She said all this in one breath, and he had not yet settled down when she brought him a newspaper and, showing it to him, said, "Writer Sahib, today I read this short story of yours several times over."

The look of confidence on his face became more prominent. He took the newspaper from her hands and peered

closely at his story and his inset photo given therein. When he looked up again, he found her beaming down at him. Her eyes attractively narrowed while smiling. Modesty and beauty playing on her white, cute face created a whirlpool which drew him in. His heartbeats rose to a crescendo and he began to feel strangely, but he couldn't give a name to this strange feeling. She stood before him with her eyes down and he was looking up at her shining face which was an open book wherein he was trying to read his destiny. On his way back home, he was lost in these musings and was awakened to reality when someone called out, "Get aside, Writer Sahib. A truck is coming behind you!"

To his sensitive mind, it was by no means an insignificant matter. Ruby had possessed his whole being and had pervaded his entire system in a way that he began to feel as if she had become his heartthrob. At home, he would sit in a secluded corner all day, shedding tears in silence...but he couldn't utter Ruby's name. His wife was intrigued at the sudden silence of her husband, but she settled her mind by hoping against hope that all was well. Years rolled by and his love for Ruby struck firm roots in his heart.

Then one day, the Writer collected all his writings which he had produced in a state of anxious waiting for the fulfilment of his consuming passion and proceeded to the city to lay bare his heart to Ruby. When he reached there, he felt as if she had been waiting for him. She even made tea for him with her own hands. Her mother was surprised. "We have servants in the house, baby," she said. "Then why are you taking the trouble?" But Ruby insisted on making tea and her mother didn't want to break her heart.

He had hardly taken a sip when Ruby said, "Writer Sahib, when you have finished your tea, I would like to discuss a personal matter with you." Saying this, she left the room to attend to some other matter. The tea stuck in his throat. His heartbeat rose. He was all too eager to hear from her the "personal matter". He tried hard but couldn't finish the tea.

A short while later, Ruby breezed into the room and sat down in front of the Writer. Colour left his face and he began to shiver. She sat still, looking at her hands. He began to give meanings to her silence. "I respect your writings," she said slowly. He nodded and looked at the papers he was holding in

his hands. Turning her face from him, she said, "You write a lot. You possess profound knowledge and understanding. But you haven't given thought to an important fact." Many questions wriggled in his mind. He looked up at her and she went on, "You have forgotten the fact that if a man deceives his own wife and children, how could his love be trusted?" Having said this, she hurried out of the room.

This left him petrified. Papers fell from his hands. He bent down and, with his trembling hands, started collecting them. His mouth had turned dry and, when he got up, he felt as if the room was revolving. He came out of Ruby's house and headed for home with heavy steps. He had lost the greatest gamble of his life. He felt as if he was guilty...guilty to himself ...guilty to his wife...guilty to his children.

When he reached home, he banged open the door and entered the house but felt, for the first time, that the walls of his house were rejecting him. He went straight to his room, slumped in his bed and started crying bitterly. When he got the breathing space, he looked around and was taken aback. His room was in a terrible mess. His papers were lying all around, his boxes lay open and his clothes

were scattered all over the place. He couldn't believe his eyes.

Blinking in disbelief, he wondered, who could have done this? He jumped down his bed and gave a once-over to his room. There lay Ruby's photo on the table. As he picked it up, he saw a note lying under it. It was from his wife. She wrote: "Be happy with your new-found love. I have read all your writings. I don't want any explanation. I tolerated your attitude for long. But enough is enough. I am leaving with my children. Where am I going? I don't know. But you...you don't take the trouble of finding us...."

He read the note several times over. He glanced at Ruby's photo and then darted out of the room like a man possessed. There was pin-drop silence in the house. He went from room to room calling his wife and children, but there was no one to answer.

With his trembling hands, he collected all his writings and, the very next moment, his poems were ablaze, his stories were in flames, his quotes were afire and the Writer...the Writer was standing in front of the flames laughing hysterically. He kept calling Ruby, his wife and his daughter. He ran out of his house with his bare feet, his clothes torn and his hair ruffled. He went from

street to street shrieking wildly – but there was none to console him for, whereas everything else was the same, the village traditions and conventions had changed. Now no one had the time for others – everyone thought of themselves.

For the next few months, the Writer was seen roaming the streets with his unkempt hair and tattered clothes – then he suddenly disappeared and no one knew where he had gone.

Now a days, on full moon, from the top of the hills on the west side of the village, he could be clearly heard chanting his poems and, in the event of a storm, his laughter can also be heard in the village streets. Elderly people say that the Writer is present in every street and every home in this village but he does not show himself...

***The soul burning in fire of love
Will sob and moan for ever.***

Khialay

The two of them were childhood friends. The streets of their village were witness to their childhood games and tender feelings. The day their feelings of affinity moved from their subconscious to the conscious, they began to feel the intensity of love for each other. But there was a deep gulf between the two. Gulalai was Khan Kaka's daughter and Sher Gul was the born servant of their family – born servant because his

father and grandfather had also been their domestic servants.

Gulalai didn't believe in social discrimination. So she had often expressed her love for him, but he didn't have the courage to do so. Khan Kaka didn't approve of her waywardness, but he connived at her indiscretions for she was very dear to him and he didn't want to break her heart.

When she grew up, she was married to her cousin. She shed many tears, but she finally submitted to the Pukhtun tradition. After her marriage, she didn't have a moment of peace for her husband was the only son of his parents and their love had spoilt him. Hence he didn't listen to anyone and always had his own way. While he would spend all night in the company of his friends, Gulalai spent all night pining for her old flame. After Gulalai's marriage, Sher Khan also went into depression. He would spend all day thinking about Gulalai. He felt that his life was incomplete without her. But he didn't share this secret with anyone.

One year after their marriage, her husband proceeded to the United States on a pleasure trip and she returned to her parents' house. There, she would occasionally catch a

glimpse of Sher Gul. They would look at each other but, being helpless, remained silent.

One day, when everyone in the family went to Bar Kanday to attend the wedding of Muhammad Khan's son, her desire to meet Sher Gul overpowered her and restlessness began to seethe in her mind. She could no more hold herself. She came to the gate and looked through it at Sher Gul, who was sitting in the hujra with his head down. She called him. Sher Gul couldn't believe his ears. His heart gave a lurch. He stood up, but was undecided. He didn't know whether he should go to see her or not. When she called him again, he went up to her. With the wave of her hand, she told him to get into the house...and the next moment, they were sitting facing each other in the vacant room. Her heart was pounding and she started talking, but he was too confused to understand.

Silence prevailed for some time. Then, in a trembling voice, she said, "Look, I'm a woman - a Pukhtun woman; still I have the courage to take the plunge. But you are a man - a strong man - then why are you having cold feet? Sher Gul, it doesn't behove a man to be so cowardly." She tried to look

into his eyes, but he evaded her. Eventually, said, "Gulalai, I understand your feelings. But..." He chocked and Gulalai saw helplessness in his eyes. "Okay then," she said. "I'll arrange everything. You'll sleep outside your room tonight....It's my order." Saying this, she walked out of the room, leaving him bewildered.

His mouth turned dry. He had grown up in this house and he owed a great deal to Khan Kaka. Also, he didn't want to tarnish the good name of his ancestors who had earned it by their long and dedicated service to this family. He knew it too that if Khan Kaka discovered this treachery, he would flay him alive. He didn't know what to do. He left the house in a dilemma, came to the hujra and took a few puffs at the narghile, but his tension persisted. He decided that he would stay away from his house that night. Then another idea gripped his mind. "Gulalai is making such a great sacrifice for me," he thought. "I'm a man and a Pukhtun, too. So why should I not respect the feelings of a helpless girl?"

He kept brooding over this problem till sundown. His parents insisted that he should have his dinner, but he declined and slumped in the cot lying in the yard. When he

closed his eyes, his heartbeats seemed to him to be the sound of her approaching steps. Strangely, he was embarrassed as well as exultant.

“It’s winter night,” said his father. “Don’t sleep in the open. You’ll catch cold.”

“But I feel suffocated inside,” he said. His mother came up with a quilt. She spread it over him and went back to her room.

The night was indeed very cold. The surrounding hills were snow-bound. With nightfall, the sky had cleared, showing up the full moon, and the cold moonlight increased the feeling of cold. With each passing moment, his tension increased. He sat up at the sound of a cat’s footfall and, whenever his father turned in bed in his room, Sher Gul would prick up his ears.

When the night had advanced, the door of their house slowly creaked open. Sher Gul began to shake all over. He heard Gulalai’s footsteps in the yard. He wrapped the quilt tightly around him, but someone removed it and got into the bed. He began to perspire all over. After a short while, someone put his leg over his thigh. He wanted to scream, but he had lost his power of speech. The next moment, he felt someone’s arms closing around his neck. The fearful thought of

disgrace gripped his mind. His mouth turned dry. His blood pressure rose sky high.

He realized that the night had passed when his father's voice struck his ears, who was saying, "The sun has risen high in the sky and Sherry is still asleep!" Sher Gul was stunned to hear this. He further tightened the quilt around him. Someone's arms were still around his neck. His whole body was in ague. He was obsessed with the fear of his father's disgrace. He didn't know how he would be able to face his parents. He strained his ears to his father who was saying, "Khan Kaka's son-in-law returned from the States last night. When Sherry gets up, send him there right away. And I'm going to get fodder for the goats." He heard the sound of his father's retreating steps. His father's words sparked off another storm in his mind. He didn't know how he would be able to face Khan Kaka's son-in-law.

His mother kept telling him to get up but he pretended to be asleep. Irritated, she burst out, "How many times do I have to tell you to get up at once and go to Khan's house? All right.....I'm coming to pull the damned quilt off you!" It scared the life out of him. Sound of the approaching steps of his mother fell on his heart as hammer strokes.

The next moment, his mother pulled away the quilt from him. Sher Gul closed his eyes tightly and braced himself. "Oh, Khialay is also here!" she said. But Sher Gul had no idea what she was talking about. He turned away his face from his mother. As he did so, his glances fell on his brother who had thrown his arms around his neck. Sher Gul took a deep breath and looked at Khialay who, being tired after having working for several days on daily wages, was lying sound asleep near him.

Some have been crying all night;
Others sound asleep with no plight.

***When the lunatic was asked, "What's life?"
He smiled and said, "It's a Broken Mirror!"***

Thank God!

They stood silent. From time to time, they would look at each other and then lower their glances. They could hear each other's heartbeats but couldn't express their feelings. On the wall in front of them ran a spider towards its web. They could hear the footfalls of the spider and the fluttering wings of the mosquito caught in the web. Through the chinks in the window wafted breeze into the

room which moved the curtains – and they could hear the rustling sound as well.

In this tranquillity, a “silent expression” was talking of love and the eyes of the two understood this expression. Jamal, who had been silently staring at Shamim, spoke up, “Sh-shamim.” She startled as if someone had aroused her from deep sleep. “Yes,” she said faintly. Jamal moistened his lips and, with his heart pounding, he gave vent to his pent up feelings. “Shamim, put your hand on my heart,” he whispered. “Then you’ll know what I want to say.” She felt as if he had taken these words out of her mouth. She instantly put her hand on his heart and looked away. Jamal’s entire being was afire and he felt the warmth of her blood in his veins.

He wanted to hold her in a tight embrace, but when he heard her father talking to someone outside, he shuddered. He put his hand on hers and pressed it firmly. “Do you understand now?” he said in a husky voice. Tears of helplessness welled up in her eyes and she whispered, “Would that I die!” He put his hand on her mouth and then cupped her face in his palms. “Don’t talk like that,” he said. “Trust me, Shamim, trust me.” “I do trust you Jamal,” she said, “but I can’t

bring myself to believe this. You've put me in an embarrassing position, and I don't know what to do. I had never imagined that it would turn out like this."

She lowered her eyes and when she looked up again, she added, "If time could stop, I would spend the rest of my life looking at you! Would that you too spend the rest of your life thinking about me!" She couldn't contain her tears which began to trickle down her cheeks. Jamal tried to stem them with his love and began to console her. "Shamim," he said, "I swear in the name of our pure love that I never had the same feelings for anyone else which I'm having for you, nor God ever let anybody's love inhere in my heart except yours." This seemed to have reminded her of something. She instantly wiped her tears and said in a tremulous voice, "I shouldn't have done this, Jamal, for there is a deep gulf between us. What have I done? What a fool I am!"

She sat down on the edge of the cot and covered her face with her hands. Jamal stood looking at her silently and then he said in a choked voice, "Shamim, do you believe in the purity of feelings?" She nodded and he

continued, "I cannot sacrifice the sanctity of love in the flames of sentiments. Believe me, if you are sitting before me, I'll keep looking at you all my life. I'm a simple Pukhtun and understand the constraints of a Pukhtun girl." She remembered something which brought tears into her eyes. "You wouldn't understand," she said amidst tears and then her sobs changed into hiccups.

Outside, her mother was talking to someone loudly, while the storm of love was seething in Jamal's heart. "Shamim, don't do this," he said nervously. "Someone might come up." "So what?" she said boldly. "I'm afraid of none." But Jamal was not so confident. He moved towards her slowly and raised her with his trembling hands. Not being able to contain herself, she hugged him tightly. Her body was shaking like a leaf. Warmth of her body pervaded his whole being. He held her face in his both hands and kissed her tearful eyes. Her body turned limp and Jamal became oblivious of himself. He kept his lips stuck to her eyes for a while.

Just when his mouth began to slither towards her pale lips, the door of his room flung open and Jamal tumbled down his chair. His servant came up running and, raising him from the floor, said, "Are you all right, Sir?"

Jamal looked at him wide-eyed and moistened his parched lips. “W-water...give me a glass of water,” he said faintly. The servant hurried out. Jamal’s heart was still pounding. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath and said, “Thank God!”

***I’m so much under restraint by
circumstances
That I can’t even think of you.***

The Newspaper

Subedar Nek Amal Khan executed the last salute of his career with such a spirit that nobody believed he had attained the age of fifty. When he received his pension papers from the Colonel, he once again raised his hand for salute. This time, he had a good look at the Colonel and, as before, he felt as if his own young son, Arshad, was standing before him.

Nek Amal Khan had joined the Army in the fond hope that he too would become a high-ranking officer but, due to his inadequate education, he couldn't rise beyond the rank of Subedar. However, he was not disappointed. He had now pinned all his hopes on his son, Arshad, who had just passed his Intermediate Examination. Nek Amal would narrate stories of his military life to his son till late at night and say, "My son, I'm very eager to see you in the uniform of a high-ranking military officer!" Arshad too was conscious of his father's keen desire. So he had procured all books relating to the ISSB Test and studied them day and night.

And then the day came when Arshad, having qualified his preliminaries, proceeded to Kohat for his ISSB test. In this competitive exam, he outshined all his companions in every field of activity. After the few days' test, when he was on his way back home, faith and confidence were writ large on his face. His father was so exuberant to see his son that, before hearing anything from him, he saluted him with great spirit. Smiling heartily, Arshad embraced his father. Then, till late at night, he told his parents and his younger sister about his experiences in the ISSB test and they listened to him with rapt attention.

The few days' wait for the result kept the family on tenterhooks. His mother offered special prayers day and night, his sister vowed to donate a pair of her clothes and observe ten fasts, and his father had already bought a buffalo from Gondal to sacrifice it on the D-Day. Arshad was conscious of the anxiety of his family on this account. So, at the instance of his father, he set off for Kohat to enquire about his result. His mind was assailed by numerous ideas and fantasies. He didn't understand the talk of passengers in the flying coach. He felt they were his subordinate soldiers. In his imagination, he ordered them to be silent. Music in the coach seemed to him to be military band being played in his honour. The trees along the road appeared to him to be military contingents offering him General Salute. The coach was moving at breakneck speed and when it was trying to overtake a truck, a bus suddenly appeared from the opposite direction. People heard a big bang. Then no crying, no sobbing was heard. The coach was beyond recognition. No one could believe it was a vehicle nor did the dead seem humans. People came in hundreds; they sympathised

with the victims and, saying, “God save us!” moved on.

In the next day’s newspaper, the story of the accident had been splashed across the front page in bold letters....on its second page were given the names of candidates who had passed their ISSB test – and Arshad’s name included them – and near the end of the third page of the newspaper was given a blood-stained and mutilated photograph with the following caption:

“The unfortunate youth who died in the flying coach accident. His family hasn’t been traced so far.”

***I was a rough-cut line on sand,
Which was erased before its completion!***

The Portrait

It had rained all day and when the cold, dreary evening was retreating into the darkness of the night, the flakes of clouds began to chase each other in the sky. The moon would momentarily peep out of the dark sheet of clouds, brighten the world with its light and then, like a newly-wed bride, would hide its face behind the dark pall of clouds.

Presently, the lightning in the sky increased. With it, lightning strokes also began to strike the surrounding hills. But the entire village was so calm that it seemed as if the residents had migrated from it. Raindrops fell with such force that they felt like heavy slaps on one's face.

Saifur was limping along in this rain and storm. The lightning showed that the water trickling down his left arm and right leg was blood-stained. He dragged himself with great difficulty but he did not utter a sound of pain. As he reached a door, he knocked it slowly and cast yearning looks at it. When he knocked at it again, it opened and a hoary-headed Baba emerged from it. Saifur stared at his eyes. The clouds rumbled and, in the flash, Baba saw that Saifur was badly wounded. He got aside and told him to get in.

Saifur took a deep breath. Baba offered him his shoulder and brought him into a room near the main door. Saifur was shivering with cold. Baba too was conscious of the chill. He at once lit a fire and, in its light, took a good look at Saifur's wounds. They stared at each other but neither said a word. Then Baba said slowly, "Your wounds are very deep. I'll dress them." When he got up to get bandages, Saifur cast a searching

look at him. Baba brought a piece of cloth which he burnt in the fire and applied it to Saifur's wounds. Saifur felt the soothing effect on his heart's wounds as well. When he felt somewhat better, Baba brought him a blanket. "Take some sleep," he said. "Then you can go in the morning." Saifur looked at him again. Baba had seen curiosity and questions in his eyes. He tactfully enquired about the cause of his wounds. Parrying the question, Saifur only said, "My enemies were after me. They pumped bullets into me and, if you hadn't provided me protection..."

When the conversation between the two prolonged, Abdul Jabbar Khan's wife in the house wondered who their servant was talking to in his small room in the darkness of the night. She tiptoed to Baba's room and heard their conversation for some time. Then she looked through a chink in the door. In the light of the fire, she saw Saifur's face. Many doubts and questions assailed her mind...but she remained silent.

Saifur had a tortured look on his face and was feeling fidgety. "I've seen many strange things in my life," he said. "I shed the blood of many innocent people for my personal gain...but now I...I deeply regret them. I now realize that if we destroy a

hundred houses, we cannot build our one single house.” Nodding his head, Baba said, “Did you ever feel pity for anyone in your life?” Saifur thought for a moment. “Yes, there indeed was an incident in my life which has been rankling with me for long,” he said with a sigh. “It has been pricking my conscience ever since.” Then he added, “When the eyes of one’s conscience become blind and one is motivated by one’s own selfish desires, one does things at which the humanity is horrified.” “Yes, you are right,” Baba said. “You were telling me something.”

Saifur ran his tongue on his dry lips and said, “Baba, it happened in a cold spell like this. Someone told me that Abdul Jabbar Khan of Aman Kot was going to retire and that, since he was a high-ranking official, he would receive a large amount as his pension grant.” Baba’s ears pricked up at the name of Abdul Jabbar Khan. “What happened then?” he said with a sense of shock.

“Then I began to worry that I might lose this golden goose,” Saifur went on. “So I kept a tab on him and when he received the amount from the bank, I was standing in the bank building. The large amount in his hands turned my conscience blind and when he left the bank, I followed him. When he realized I

was following him, he started running; but I soon overtook and overpowered him....Baba, he made pathetic appeals to me for mercy, but I did not relent. Just in one go, I snatched away his hard-earned money of forty years. When I thought my crime would be exposed if he lived, I instantly poured a few slugs into his head....Baba, I can forget everything in the world but not his last breath and the questions in his eyes....I can't ever forget them."

Saifur was narrating these events and Baba's face kept changing its colours. When the flame rose in the fireplace, Saifur saw Baba's blanched face, but he said nothing. Baba rose silently, opened the door and entered the house. As he did so, Saifur's glances, in the light of the fire, fell on Abdul Jabbar Khan's portrait hanging on the front wall. Saifur's eyes bulged and his mouth turned dry. He stood still like a statue, staring at the portrait.

Inside the house, Baba ran after his rifle. As he grabbed the rifle, someone put a hand on his shoulder. He shuddered. When he looked back, he found Bibi Sahiba standing behind him. Her eyes were aflame. He wanted to say something, but she stopped him, saying, "Baba, I heard every word the man said. The fire of vengeance is burning more fiercely in

my heart. But this is the house of a Pukhtun. When one comes to the house of a Pukhtun for protection, killing him is not in accord with the spirit of honour and Pukhtun tradition. Baba, Saifur is lying injured and raising hand at an injured person is against the norms of decency. Please go and give him a safe conduct.”

Safur overheard this. He began to feel more guilty. When Baba came to his room, Saifur had made good his escape in the darkness of the night. Baba ran after him; but he couldn't see anything in the pitch dark....And a few moments later, the people in the village heard a gunshot. The report of the gun raised many questions in the mind of Abdul Jabbar Khan's widow, but she didn't say anything to her servant.

The next day, everyone in the village went about saying that Saifur, the killer of many innocent souls, shot himself dead the night before.

***When contrition is upon one, one's
conscience awakens,
And then life becomes a burden on life's
shoulders.***

The Murder

The simplicity of the simple village was still full of excitement. In the evenings, the beauties of water resorts manifested themselves with great fanfare. At the ovens, the boisterous laughter of damsels further raised the temperature. Swings, hanging from the high branches of trees, would keep the life moving. In the village, houses were brown but consciences were clear. Streets were

narrow but hearts were spacious. Walls were weak but pledges were strong. In the mosques, people would discuss their problems till late at night and, in the hujras, the strings of violins still warbled traditional songs.

Jamal and Marjana were also two songs of the violin of life. Jamal's charms were the talk of the town; but Marjana's youth couldn't come to the lips of people. Since their villages lay a mere two miles apart, they shared their weal and woe. Marjana was engaged to Jamal since her childhood. Jamal was the son of Kamal Khan who was her father's old friend. Jamal and Marjana had sprinkled colours of youthful joy at each other which left a lasting impression on them. Marjana would cast loving glances on Jamal and Jamal would remain lost in the thoughts of Marjana. When they were married, the whole village shared their happiness.

Kashmala was Marjana's younger sister and Naeem was her elder brother who was a Major in the Army. He at times came to the village on leave and shared his experiences of the military life with Kasmala till late at night. Although she had heard these stories from him many times before,

she listened to them intently because he loved her very much and she was conscious of this fact.

Jamal was very dear to Marjana's entire family. Kashmala always talked about him and when Marjana was married to him, Kashmala often stayed at her sister's house. When she addressed him lovingly as "Bhaijaan" (elder brother), his eyes would well up with tears of joy and each string of the violin of his heart would start playing a song which he did not understand.

A year and a half later, when Marjana was expecting a child, Kashmala hastened to her house for help. While pressing clothes for Jamal, serving him meals and shining his shoes, her heart and her conscience would question each other in a way which left her utterly confused. She would tell herself something which only she could hear.

When her child was forty days old, Marjana came over to her father's house. Kashmala was very happy that day. While Marjana was talking to her mother about her illness, Kashmala was busy beefing to Bhaijaan about his "indifference" towards her. In the evening, Major Sahib came up and enlivened the atmosphere. Kashmala buzzed around merrily in the house that day and, at

the approach of the night, she set the beds for her brother and her Bhaijaan in the lounge. When the complaints had been heard and answered, noises in the house began to fade into the silence of the night.

Everyone in the house fell asleep except Kashmala who was restless and sleepless and kept tossing and turning in her bed. When a subtle feeling titillated her conscience, her heart began to pound madly. She raised her head from her pillow and looked around but found nothing but silence. At times, Jamal was caught in the cobweb of her thoughts and she was carried away by his youthful charms. Many quaint ideas assailed her mind, leaving her with a feeling of guilt. She would repent, seek Almighty's forgiveness, and would close her eyes again.

When the night had advanced, the lantern, hanging in front of her, ran out of oil and the house plunged into complete darkness. This made her uneasy. In her imagination, she saw Jamal smiling down at her amiably. She thought for a while and then she got up slowly. She combed her hair and tiptoed to the lounge. Each vein in her body throbbled with excitement, she began to breathe heavily and her body started

shivering. But her heart, like a child, was holding her hand and was leading her on.

The lounge was not far from her room and she soon found herself standing at the head of Jamal's bed. She took a deep breath and then she laid her hands on Jamal's head. Her entire body was on fire. She didn't know what to do. Jamal was fast asleep. As her body touched the bed, it creaked, scaring the life out of her. She dropped down on the edge of Jamal's bed. Major Sahib turned in his bed and when she became aware of someone else's movements in the dark, her nervousness increased and she hurriedly crawled out of the room on all fours.

She was perspiring all over and as she reached her bed, she fell prone on it. She started crying bitterly and her heartbeat went sky-high. Gradually, it became faint and, with it, her crying turned into sobs and, then, they receded into the silence of the dark night. When the darkness of the night gave way to the light of the day, Kashmala was found lying dead in her bed with her eyes wide open...

***You didn't enquire about my condition;
My heart's desire remained in my heart.***

Turn Back the Taxi!

Jannat Gul scanned the sky and took a deep breath. He heaved his spade to his shoulder and began to trudge back home. Darkness had set in but a few farmers were still busy with their labour. He could just make them out in the dim light of the moon. He had spent all day in his farm but, due to shortage of water, he couldn't properly irrigate it. A folk song strayed onto his lips again and again, but it escaped just as quickly as it had come and he didn't remember a word of it.

His village was not far from where he worked and, by the time he reached it, people had lit their lamps. He was so lost in his thoughts that he couldn't remember when he reached his house. As he entered the door, he dropped the spade, shook his clothes well and made for the big hujra in his locality.

Musical rendition was in full swing in the hujra and when someone started crooning a folk song to the accompaniment of the pitcher and guitar, Jannat Gul saw his own image hovering vaguely before him. Being tired and overwhelmed by distressing thoughts, he reclined against the wall and kept staring at the youngsters in the hujra.

The village was common to all. So the villagers knew each other very well. It was the routine of this village and Jannat Gul was a part of the simple beauty of the village.

When the night advanced, the villagers began to retreat to their abodes. Jannat Gul realized that he hadn't had his dinner yet. He returned home with a feeling which he did not understand. The kerosene lamp was sending forth dim light in his house. His wife got up and came to him. "Thank God, you are back home," she said in a trembling voice. In the dim light, he could see that her

face was soaked with tears. His heart gave a lurch. "W-what happened? Are you all right?" he asked in a choked voice. His wife mopped her tears with her torn shawl and turned to her husband. "Nazaka's temperature hasn't subsided," she said gloomily and looked at her daughter who was lying on a cot near the fireplace with her eyes closed. When Jannat Gul approached her and put his hand on her forehead, he felt the burning sensation. Without a word, he walked out of the house with heavy steps.

Presently, Jannat Gul's wife saw a lantern entering the house. In its dim light, she could make out the village compounder followed by her husband, who was holding doctor's box in his hand. The compounder put his hand on Nazaka's forehead. "Oh, she's running high temperature," he said involuntarily and applied cold sponging to the kid. He then administered her some kind of mixture. "She'll be all right soon," he assured Jannat Gul. "But it would be better if you take her to the city hospital tomorrow," he added. Jannat Gul's mouth turned dry. He looked up at the compounder but he, without a word, picked up his box and left the house.

Jannat Gul looked at his daughter and then at his wife who was standing shell-

shocked. "Compose yourself," he told her. Presently, Nazaka sobbed and, in her choked voice, asked for water. Jannat Gul looked at his wife and found signs of relief on her face. She hurriedly went and gave a glass of water to her daughter. Nazaka opened her eyes, looked at her father and mother and then closed her eyes again. When the night passed and the call for prayer was given, the husband and the wife looked at each other.

Nazaka's temperature had risen again and her eyes were closed. When the light began to spread, Jannat Gul fetched a taxi from the stand. The mother took her daughter in her arms and followed her husband. As they got into the cab, Jannat Gul said to the driver, "Hurry up. Straight to the hospital."

They had covered a short distance when the minions of the law stopped their taxi for checking. Jannat Gul talked to them in a trembling voice and they let them go for they knew him. But the road was blocked at several points with heavy boulders lying on the road. Near them stood the security guards with rifles in their hands. They would come up, put questions to Jannat Gul, search the taxi and then wave it to move.

Jannat Gul got so fed up with all this hassle that he burst out in anger, “Putting fellow-beings to inconvenience is against the spirit of Islam. After all, I am the son of this soil. I have ladies with me. My daughter is terribly sick and I am taking her to the hospital. Please have a heart!” But his remonstrance fell on deaf ears for they were obedient to their masters and not to Islam or cultural traditions. The city hospital was one hour drive from their village, but they hadn’t reached it in five hours! Minions of the law worried about their career, while Jannat Gul worried about his daughter.

When the city hospital was only two furlongs ahead, Jannat Gul’s wife put her hand on her husband’s shoulder. He looked back in horror and saw tears in her eyes. She was staring at Nazaka and he too turned his glances on her. Nazaka’s eyes were wide open and lifeless. Two drops of tears fell from his eyes and disappeared in his beard. He turned to the driver and said in a choked voice, “Turn back the taxi please!”

***I’m going away with my empty bowl;
You’ve robbed me of everything, you cruel
time!***

Dry Tears

Khanasiba was the born servant of Rahimullah Khan's family. She remembered that when she was just ten years of age, her mother would teach her how to do domestic chores and how to behave with the members of the Khan's family. Then the time taught her everything.

When her mother died, she bore the tragedy stoically and pinned her all hopes on the Khan's family. From early in the morning till late at night, she would remain so busy in her domestic chores that she would forget about herself and would often go to bed with empty stomach. She was young then. But when she grew into adulthood, she remained alien to the carefree life of adults. She never laughed. She was oppressed and suppressed by the cruel time and she realized her pathetic condition only when she, after a long time, looked at herself in the mirror on the second day of Eid.

Signs of ageing showed very clearly on her face. Gray strands peeped out of her dark hair. Her heart began to sink. To her, life seemed to be a heavy burden on her frail body. This feeling untimely broke the back of her life-long aspirations. When she sat down to mop the floor, she could hardly rise again. Each joint in her body ached. She bore all this with great patience and never complained to anyone. Gradually, this weakness in her body confined her to bed. She coughed and coughed day and night. Still she tried to get up and do the chores, but she couldn't. She had no strength to stand on her legs.

Once Khan's younger son returned home late at night and saw Khanasiba lying in the yard in the cold under the open sky and coughing her guts out. He turned to his servant, Bahadur Khan Kaka, and snapped, "It's a house and not a hospital, understand?" Bahadur Kaka understood. He instantly set the cot for Khanasiba in the cowshed near the house and she shifted to it with only her mother's old quilt blackened by soot. She lay all alone in the shed all the time. Khan Sahib was busy with the problems of the village and his wife hated the sick. Only Bahadur Kaka was there to console her from time to time.

Khanasiba's condition was declining day by day and she was assailed by distressing thoughts. She remembered her childhood days when she had fallen ill and her mother, with the permission of the Khan, had fetched a doctor for her. She had instantly felt well when the doctor had administered her an injection. These memories brought smile to her dry lips and she fondly hoped that the Khan would discover her illness and call in a doctor.

For the next few days, her heart was a see-saw between hope and disappointment. Then, one day, she heard the Khan say to Bahadur Kaka, "Go and get a senior doctor

from the city.” This brought colour of life on her wan face. She stuck out her face from the quilt and heard the car drive out of the gate. She heaved a sigh of relief. She felt as if she was really “fortunate” (as her name suggested). Exultantly, she wrapped the quilt around her tightly and waited for the arrival of the doctor. Her heart was thumping, but underneath it lay a sense of relief, giving her strength to bear her misfortune.

After a long wait, she heard Khan’s resonant voice. “My son couldn’t sleep all night. Will he get well or not?” This made her uneasy. She thought Khan’s son was sick. She instantly forgot her own illness for she had brought up Khan’s son with her own hands.

She heard two cars leaving the house. Their noise receded and then faded into the silence of the night. As she turned in her bed, she heard footsteps and when she looked up, she found Bahadur Kaka standing in the doorway. He looked downcast. This gave rise to her apprehension. She opened her mouth to say something, but he pre-empted her. “Khan’s son couldn’t sleep all night.... It’s a strange world we are living in,” he said with a sigh. “Is Khan’s son so sick?” she asked with concern. “Khan’s son is not sick,” he said. “His dog, Tiger, is sick and Khan sent me to get the

best doctor for him from the city.” Khanasiba’s head began to spin. Two drops of tear fell from her eyes. She felt very small. Slowly, she turned her eyes to Rahimullah Khan’s house. There, she saw the dim shadows of her childhood self and adulthood flitting about. She burst into tears but they boisterously laughed at her helplessness.

Some are crying for their misfortunes;

Some are laughing at others’ helplessness.

The Last Letter

The train gave a few whistles and then, with a jerk, it began to move. Sohail felt this jerk in his heart. He took such a long puff at the cigarette that it began to burn into a flame. But he didn't notice this flame. Maybe because he had greater flames burning in his heart than this one. He stuck his head out of

the window in his compartment and saw people standing on the platform waving to the passengers in the train and the passengers waving back to them. Sohail stared at them. He started thinking of suitable words to express his feelings of separation. Just then, he caught sight of Seema and he gaped. He couldn't believe his eyes. Screaming wildly, he thrust out his hand and waved to her. She spotted him and came running after him like a child. As she got close to him, the train gathered speed and she was left behind on the platform. She kept waving to him until the train had disappeared from her sight. She then became conscious of the tears flowing down her cheeks. She wiped them off at once and left the railway station with her head bent down.

Sohail and Seema were close friends at the university. During their two years' association, they drew so close to each other that the concept of time and space had faded from their minds. Sohail had come to the university from far off to discover himself, while Seema belonged to an urban family, known for its wealth and nobility. Sohail had visited her house several times in the past. So her father and brothers knew him very well.

His graceful manners and his innate modesty lent him dignity.

Their two years stay in the university came to an end in the wink of an eye, leaving them empty. Today, when he set off for his village after qualifying his Masters, his heart began to warble a song reminiscent of their good old days. He shed tears at each note of this song. But the inexorable time did not care a bit for his tears.

Back in the village, he made several attempts to tell his father about Seema but, each time, Pukhtoon traditions smothered his voice. For quite some time, he remained under great tension on this account. One day, his father told him about his proposed engagement to his cousin, and all his hopes of marrying Seema were dashed to the ground. When his mother began to tell him about his cousin, his face kept changing colours. He tried to shout out his protest and tell the whole world about his love for Seema, but the “family traditions” and his regard for the good name of his elders didn’t let him do so. Whereas his friends went around laughing and enjoying themselves, he kept shedding tears at his helplessness.

His engagement to his cousin was solemnised during which songs were sung

and greetings were offered. But Sohail moved alone and remained silent. He didn't know what to do. In this backdrop, there came Seema's letter which created a storm in his mind. She wrote, "Yesterday, someone told me about your engagement to your cousin. I wanted to say much to you on the subject but then I decided not to. I'm not annoyed with you, but I wish I could have seen your fiancée. After all, she's your cousin. She must be as charming as you are. I, too, was engaged to my cousin yesterday. Please bear with me. All this was predestined...."

This letter from Seema brought to an end all his innocent aspirations. He wondered how she discovered all this. But when he thought of her engagement to her cousin, it gave rise to the pressure in his veins. Even though he found it hard to accept this fact, he kept trying to console himself on this account.

The time rolled on and when, after the engagement, he was married, he remembered Seema at each step of his life. His wife detected this uneasiness in his nature but couldn't divine the reason for it.

A year later, when a son was born to him, he banished all thoughts of the past from his mind and reconciled to his new life.

But the mirror of this reconciliation cracked when, three years later, he received another letter from Seema. It was, as before, a brief note. "I learnt about your son and, believe me, it gave me immense pleasure.... Oh, yes, a daughter has been born to me as well who's my lookalike. Your son too must be just like you. But I'm sorry I can't see him. Please give him my love..."

Images of Seema and her daughter flitted across his mind. He wanted to go to her and see her daughter. But it seemed difficult now. He put Seema's letter in his old, university time diary and then got busy with his routine life. Instead of doing a job in the city, he set up a factory in his village and remained busy there from early in the morning till late at night.

Ten years later, his business was expanding fast and his routine changed. Once, when he returned home late at night, he found his kids asleep. His wife laid out his dinner. He had just taken a morsel when she said, "Today, a letter arrived at our home address. I don't know who it is from." He lost his colour. He told her to show it to him. She got up to get it. His mind was assailed by many questions. When his wife handed him the letter, his heart gave a lurch. He hurriedly

opened the envelope and, finding Seema's letter in it, he reminisced about their good old days. She wrote, "My heart was sinking yesterday. So I, along with my kids, came to the university campus and sat down under the dense tree where we sometimes sat till late in the evening. While the kids were playing, I thought whenever you came to the city, you would certainly come to this place and, just as I was yearning for my youthful days, you too would sit under this tree and keep thinking about me."

His lips turned white. He left the dinner unfinished and went off to his room. His wife didn't ask him about it for she had no words for that....With the passage of time, his memories of her receded into the oblivion.

Twenty-five years later, his children had grown up and they had further expanded the factory. So he was often to himself. To pass his time, he would either read long novels or view the pictures of his past through his thick glasses.

Once, when he was reclining against a pillow, reading Nasim Hijazi's novel, he heard a knock on the door. He got up and walked to the door with heavy steps. As he opened the door, he saw the postman. He handed him an envelope and went away. He looked at it

from behind his glasses. The frail heart in his frail body lurched. Seema had realized the passage of twenty-five years. This time, she wrote: "Yesterday, when I looked at myself in the mirror, I spotted a few white strands in my hair. Your hair must also have turned grey and how graceful you would be looking with them. You are always present before my eyes and, I'm sure, whenever you're alone, you'd remember me too."

After reading the letter several times over, he mumbled, "She's crazy." He walked to the dressing table and looked at his grey hair in the mirror. He smiled and then heaved a cold sigh.

A few years later, all his sons and daughters were married off and they went away. Thenceforward, the clouds of loneliness hung heavy on him. He would stay all day in his room alone and had even become fed up with books.

A few days later, a parcel came which created an upheaval in his life. He received it from the postman with his trembling hands and peered at the address through his glasses. He smiled as he recognized Seema's handwriting and mumbled, "Oh boy, I'm still so dear to this silly girl!" He then opened the parcel with his unsteady hands and found his

old letters he had addressed her and many small gifts he had sent her from time to time and which he had forgotten. He was all too eager to read her letter. He looked for it and found an envelope at the bottom of the parcel with his name written on it. He hurriedly picked it up with his trembling hands and it aroused tender feelings in his heart. She wrote: "Forgive me, Sohail, forgive me for I'm dead....I died forty years ago when I heard of your engagement. Through my will, I left all your letters to a friend of mine with the request that she should send you letters at appropriate times....Please don't be annoyed with me for I can't even imagine looking at another person....Please forgive your silly Seema."

The gruesome idea that she might have committed suicide gave him the shock of his life. Her letter fell from his trembling hands and he stood dumbfounded....When his sons came up, they found him sprawled on the floor with his eyes open and Seema's letter resting on his chest.

***O my Love, long time has passed. So what?
You're still living in every breath of mine!***

Justice

At Bacha Khan Chowk, he looked at the memorial of the “Great Pukhtun”. He took out his glasses from his side pocket, put them on with his trembling hands and, when he looked at the memorial again, he saw handful of dust on Bacha Khan’s face. He

recalled the great struggle he had waged with the British for the glory of the Pukhtun nation. "Very sorry for this ungrateful nation," he said under breath. He turned to the rickshaws, buses and wagons which were, against the traffic rules, trying to overtake one another. He kept watching them for some time and, when he spotted people running across the road, he joined them and got on to the other side of the road.

Here, he saw barbers on the footpath busy shaving and dressing hair of the wayfarers. They threw the cut hair into a drain running along the footpath. He watched this for some time and then whispering, "Sorry for you, you insensitive nation," he moved on.

Feeling a foul smell in the air, he took out his handkerchief from his overcoat pocket and held it to his nose. A little ahead, he saw dead dogs, cats and chickens lying on the roadside. The whole atmosphere was redolent with their nauseating stench. People hurried past this spot with their noses covered but none of them had the time nor courage to question this anomaly. He had a mind to go to the veterinary hospital and ask them why they threw dead animals on the roadside like this. As he was about to move,

he saw a bunch of policemen standing on the other side of the road. He adjusted his glasses and stared at them. He discovered that they were standing in front of the Head Office of the Traffic Police. He said to himself, "The stench of putrefied flesh must be disturbing these officers as well. Then why don't they do something about it?"

"Silence is gold," he told himself and, heaving a cold sigh, he moved on. Here, the footpath had been dug up at several places. He looked at it regretfully and said, "Strange people these are. They don't realize that they are harming themselves." A few steps ahead, he saw a signboard on a building with the words "Radio Pakistan" inscribed on it. He stared at the sign and then at the imposing building. He thought for a moment and smiled to himself but said nothing. A short while later, he found himself standing in front of the Minister's office.

His name was Ghamkhor – sympathiser of his soil, well-wisher of his land, sharer of weal and woe of humanity. His own tragedy was so great that it had untimely cracked his back. And his tragedy was that his wife had been sick for a very long time. He had taken her to many distant places for treatment but she hadn't recovered and he

was now looking up to the Almighty for His decision.

Apart from his wife, he had in the house his only son, Murad. But Murad was deprived of the opportunity of serving his ailing mother because he was posted far away from home. He had made pathetic appeals to his superiors to transfer him to his village, but they wouldn't listen because he didn't have the recommendation of a bigwig nor did he know the technique of pleasing his superiors.

In the beginning, Ghamkhor would console his son, but when the continuous sickness of his wife drove him to desperation, he approached a member of the Union Council in his village and, with great difficulty, persuaded him to issue him a letter for the Minister, requesting him to order Murad's transfer to his own village. Now he had come to the Minister's office, holding the Member's recommendations in his hand.

He stood silently for quite some time. When he became tired of waiting, he approached the peon of the Minister who was sitting near his office door. "Where is the Minister?" he asked the peon. The latter twirled his moustache and said gruffly, "He's in the meeting." To Ghamkhor, it meant that

the Minister was too busy at the moment. So he stood waiting for some more time.

When he approached the peon again and repeated his question, he flew into a rage. "Didn't I tell you that Sahib is in the meeting?" he snapped. "Why don't you understand?" Ghamkhor was shaken. He wanted to pounce upon the rascal and wrench his neck; but when he considered his own age, he desisted from this adventure.

While Ghamkhor was waiting, the peon rose and went away to get something. Ghamkhor got his opportunity and slipped into the Minister's office. He was taken aback to see that the Minister was lolling in an easy chair laughing boisterously in the company of a bevy of comely lasses lounging around him. Spotting Ghamkhor in the office, the Minister sat up and growled, "What's it, old man?" Ghamkhor thrust forward the letter and said, "This is Member Sahib's letter. It's a request for Murad's transfer..." The Minister snatched the letter from Ghamkhor's hands but, instead of reading it, he pressed the call bell button on his table. The peon entered the room and stood with his head bent down, but when he raised his eyes, he found Ghamkhor in the room. His whiskers bristled up with rage. He opened his mouth to say something,

but the Minister rapped out, "How many times do I have to tell you that when I'm in the meeting, don't let the dross disturb me? But you don't seem to understand..."

The peon grabbed Ghamkhor's hand and dragged him out of the room. When they were out, the peon rebuked him with such hard words that the people standing by looked at one another. On his way back home, Ghamkhor blurted out, "O you hapless nation, you've raised such people to power!"

When he entered his house, his wife looked at him enquiringly. "Murad will soon be transferred to his home-town," he told her. "I personally delivered the Member's letter to the Minister." And a few days later, when Murad returned home, he was holding an official letter. But this was not his transfer letter. It was his dismissal orders.

***Who could expect justice from whom?
They're all thieves and accomplices of
thieves.***

Quality, Not Quantity

Whenever his father returned home after poetic rendition, Lawangeen would open the door for him and his father would feel immensely pleased. He would take Lawangeen in his arms and kiss him on both cheeks. Without giving a breathing space to his father, Lawangeen would start lisping out questions to him.

Lawangeen was five years of age and was the only son of his father, Gulab Din. The latter was a prominent figure in the locality. Poetic rendition was incomplete without him for he held perfect mastery of the art of poetry. He was held in high esteem by the great scholars of his time for the flight of his imagination and depth of thought.

He was widely known for his sublime poetry and, at the same time, he was endowed with great humility. He was very simple in his habits and his demeanour was very dignified. Poets would come to meet him in large numbers and he would treat them very kindly. Lawangeen liked these traits of his father. When his father shared with him his experiences of the poetic renditions he had attended, he would listen to him with keen interest. He often attended poetic gatherings with his father and listened to each verse being recited with rapt attention. Restlessness of his soul kept increasing with his growing years. At times, he would compose a poem and sometimes a short story and when he showed them to his father, he would be very pleased and kiss him on his forehead. In his image, Gulab Din saw himself. He exulted in the thought that, after him, his son would serve Pashto literature.

Time rolled on and, with it, Lawangeen kept learning about life. Just as his mental horizon was widening, the literary stature of his father was also rising. So much so that his poetry came to be quoted everywhere for public guidance. The poetic stalwarts of his time considered it a great honour to quote his lines.

Under the influence and guidance of his father, Lawangeen's literary grasp had increased manifold. Once, in a literary gathering, a friend of his said, "Do you know Spin Gul Chinar?" Lawangeen thought for a moment and then said, "Yes, I heard his name once before." His friend was shocked. "Chinar Sahib is the author of fifty books," he said, "and you heard his name just once?" He then started eulogizing the literary talent of Chinar Sahib. So much so that Lawangeen created a very impressive picture of Chinar Sahib in his mind.

He was now all too eager to see Chinar Sahib. He got all the information from his friend in this connection. Chinar's village was not far from his but the road leading to it was devious. So, after some difficulty, he reached his village. There, he asked a few people but none of them seemed to know Chinar Sahib. He stood amazed. "Have I come to the wrong

place?” he wondered. “If not, then how come these people don’t know a great writer like Chinar Sahib living in their midst?” He was utterly confused. Then an old man came along and said, “Gentleman, do you mean Chinaray, the small time dealer?” Lawangeen shook his head, “No, sir. I mean Spin Gul, the poet.” The old man mumbled something and moved on. Lawangeen spotted a few children playing in the street. He approached them and enquired about Chinar Sahib. They said, “Yes, yes. We know him.” Lawangeen heaved a sigh of relief.

When he reached Chinar’s house, he knocked at the door and stood aside staring at it. A short while later, a character appeared at the door. Unlike his name, he was neither elderly nor white nor tall. The man stared at Lawangeen and then said, “You’re probably a poet.” Lawangeen moistened his lips and said, “Yes, sir. I’ve come to meet Spin Gul Chinar. Is this his house?” The man burst into laughter. Lawangeen was shocked to see snuff in his mouth and at the way he was laughing. “I’m Chinar,” the man said. “What brings you here?” Lawangeen stood dumbfounded.

When he sat down with Chinar Sahib and was about to say something, Chinar Sahib

said, “Gentleman, I’ve written no fewer than eighty books on literature, teaching wisdom to thousands through these books. I don’t think anyone in this country has contributed so much to literature – not even Hamza Baba. The so called writers of modern age are no writers at all. They are just sitting in their chairs. They haven’t got the smattering of literature...”

Lawangeen listened to all this with great surprise. He didn’t know how to participate in the conversation. He then mustered courage and chipped in, “Chinar Sahib, your literary output is undoubtedly very great and you’re even now working. How come no one knows you in your own village?” He burst into laughter again. “Not only no one in this village, but no writer of the modern age knows my value nor understands my work,” he said and added, “But let me tell you that future critics would conduct research into my works and understand my thought process.”

Lawangeen was amazed at the way Chinar was laughing. He wondered that if people didn’t pay any attention to his writings in the modern age, then who would care for it in future? Only such writing, he

believed, is worth its while as represents its age and is acceptable to its readers.

Chinar Sahib put a fresh lump of snuff under his lip and said, "Gentleman, the radio and TV people keep running after me. I'm also fed up with the telephone calls of renowned singers who request me to allow them to sing my poems. But these singers can't do justice to my poetry. I don't care for these people for they have no standard...."

When Lawangeen heard all this, the earth under his feet began to shake. He couldn't believe his ears nor could he understand his philosophy. So he decided to leave, and Chinar too considered it a good riddance.

Lawangeen left Chinar's village and trudged back home with a heavy heart. He was trying to solve the mystery about Chinar Sahib. His picture that he had formed in his mind a few days earlier had now lost its colour and he was averse to his writings.

It was dusk when he reached home. Feeling disillusioned and tired, he lay down in bed. Just then his father returned from work. "What's the matter, son?" he asked. "Are you all right?" Lawangeen told him the whole story. Gulab Din embraced his son and said, "Don't distress yourself, my son. Greatness

comes not with quantity but quality.”
Lawangeen found answer to all his questions.
Spin Gul Chinar’s image appeared in his mind
again and he clearly saw the difference
between his name and stature. He nodded his
head thoughtfully and repeated his father’s
words: “Quality, not quantity.”
However praises one may shower on oneself,
But the fact remains that a spade is a spade.

Mother

The night was sound asleep in the lap of tranquillity. Large chunks of clouds were drifting behind one another in the sky. The moon would, from time to time, peep out of the thick sheet of clouds, feast its eyes on the beauties of nature, whisper something to the stars and then hide again behind the dense

clouds. The night was calm, but a dog somewhere in the distance broke its silence by complaining about his troubled life. The village dogs sympathised with him by crying loudly and this went on till the small hours. The dogs of the village Khans did not join them. They growled angrily, warning the other dogs not to disturb the Khans.

Like all other people in the village, Lewanai was also fast asleep. But signs of sickness were evident on her face. Her premarital name was Saeeda, but her mother called her by her pet name "Bakhtawara" (the fortunate). When she was married, her husband and his family began to call her "Lewanai" (the crazy). Whenever her husband addressed her as Lewanai, she would burst into laughter. It would remind her of her childhood.

When the night had advanced, Lewanai suddenly started screaming. Her husband was startled. When he turned on the light and looked at her, he was shocked. She was sitting in her bed, shaking all over. Her large eyes were full of tears and she was looking haggard. Her hair was ruffled and her face was dripping with sweat. She was gasping for breath and each breath seemed her last breath. Her husband stood like a

stone statue. He didn't know what to do. Then he came over to her side and, as he put his hand on her head, he felt as if her whole body was on fire. He wiped the sweat off her face, but it didn't do any good for, in spite of his repeated calls, she only responded with soft moans.

He got up, poured out water from the pitcher and gave it to Lewanai. It made her feel good and she opened her eyes. This brought him tears of joy. She cast wistful glances on him and smiled. "Forgive me please," she said. "Forgive your Lewanai." He was shocked. He felt a storm rising in his mind. He moistened his lips. "Please don't talk like that," he pleaded. "I won't live any longer," she said, peering at him. Many colours appeared and disappeared on his face. He looked up at the ceiling, listened to the silence of the night and then turned to his wife. "Don't you worry, my dear," he said. "I'll take you to the city hospital first thing in the morning."

The mention of "hospital" brought tears to her eyes. She hated hospitals. Whenever her husband spoke about them, she would fold her hands and say, "I'd rather die under my own roof than go to a hospital." Meanwhile, clouds in the sky thickened.

Barking of dogs receded and the crowing of cocks began to be heard. She worried about her ailment and he worried about his helplessness.

The night gave way to daylight, but the villagers had no inkling of what had happened to Lewanai during the night. In the village, there was only one woman, Nazo Tror, whom Lewanai's husband had told about the nature of her ailment. Lewanai was now helpless because of her illness and her resourcelessness.

The next day, she was lying, with her eyes closed, on the back seat of a vehicle which was on its way to the city hospital. Her head was resting in Nazo's lap and her husband was sitting next to her with his mind gravid with serious apprehensions.

As usual, there was a maddening rush of people in the hospital. In front of the lady doctor's office, free-for-all was going on among women patients which gave the impression that it was not a hospital but a bedlam. Most of the women gathered there didn't seem to have heard of the disease for which they had come to the hospital. On their faces could be seen the traces of heavy make-up. Whenever the door of the doctor's room opened, these women would start pushing

each other. Bones faced the danger of being broken in this hustle. Big and strong women pushed their way into the room, while the weak and sick ones were left behind. A fat male employee of the hospital could be seen moving about among women, but no one had the pluck to tell him not to do so.

Lewanai's husband saw all this and understood why his wife so abhorred hospitals. He thought of returning to the village, leaving his wife at the mercy of her fate, but then he shrugged off this idea. He was looking around helplessly when he caught sight of Dr Sardar. He couldn't believe his eyes. He couldn't imagine him being there. Dr Sardar was Lewanai's brother. She didn't see him for her eyes were closed. But when she opened her eyes, she found herself lying in the hospital ward with her brother standing near her. Tears welled up in her eyes. But there was no helplessness in these tears. This time, they were marked by hope and confidence and this was so because she knew her own blood was standing near her.

The day ended and the night approached, but the endless chattering of women in the ward didn't cease. They were all talking at the same time. The patients were lying in beds with their eyes closed,

waiting for the end of their misery. Each patient had at least three attendants who were talking their heads off. But there was no one to stop them. Lewanai too was lying in her bed. From time to time, she would open her eyes, look around and close them again. Her husband came into the ward several times and when he looked at her dry lips, many ideas crossed his mind, but he remained silent. And when Dr Sardar entered the ward, all shaken up, it gave rise to his apprehensions. He watched the doctor's lips. Sardar wiped the sweat off his forehead and then said with a deep sigh, "Her operation is set for tomorrow."

Lewanai's husband turned pale. Lewanai raised her head from her pillow and sobbed, "I don't want to live any more. I want to die. I'll kill myself. My husband is fed up with me. My death will give him his freedom and I'll get my peace." Having said this, she burst into tears. Dr Sardar tried to console her and, after giving her a few shots of tranquillizers, he hurried out. Lewanai's husband looked at his wife, whose eyes were closed, and then he too went out of the ward with heavy steps. As he looked up at the night sky, tears began to trickle down his eyes.

His mind was assailed by distressing thoughts. Lewanai was very dear to him in spite of the fact that she did not requite his love, she felt resentful with him over small matters, she never listened to him, she would burst into tears over trifling matters and her husband would feel guilty for having married her. But, today, all these habits of hers seemed rather likeable to him. He couldn't imagine living without her. But she had become so fed up with life due to her ailment that she couldn't even look at her husband.

This turbulent night in the hospital at long last came to an end and the light of the day began to spread. Lewanai was still under sedation. Dr Sardar entered the ward and whispered to her husband. By the time the usual rush in the hospital began to form, Lewanai was lying on the operation table. Her husband was standing outside the operation theatre in a state of nervousness. He tried to console himself and began to talk to himself like a madman. Nazo, who had spent the whole night on the hard floor, was sitting close to the door of the operation theatre and people in the ward kept coming and going.

Two hours later, a stretcher rolled out of the operation theatre. Faces of the two

men pushing the stretcher were covered with white masks and the stretcher was also covered with a white sheet. The stretcher was wheeled into a side-room on the left side of the female ward. Lewanai's husband, watching all this, couldn't believe his eyes. His heart was pounding and fearful thoughts assailed his mind. He shot after the stretcher like a man possessed. The two men who came out of the room didn't say anything and he stepped into the room.

Lewanai was lying in her bed. Her eyes were closed and she was running high temperature. Her lips were parched and she was groaning. Her husband's mind was gripped by apprehensions.

Dr Sardar entered the room. Signs of happiness were evident on his face. He approached Lewanai's bed, put his hand on her forehead and then went over to Nazo, who had been sitting silently for long. He whispered something to her and she removed the sheet, revealing a cute little girl child, sound asleep in her lap. The doctor beamed down at the kid and said, "This is Zarqaish." Lewanai's husband looked at the babe, smiled and repeated, "Zarqaish."

It was another tired day advancing towards evening to fall asleep in its lap again.

When Lewanai opened her eyes, she looked at her husband, smiled and then closed her eyes again.

In the evening, when she opened her eyes again, she found herself surrounded by her parents and brothers and sisters. She held Zaraish close to her heart and, with a broad smile on her face, started mumbling like one out of one's mind, "I don't want to die....I want to live....I want to live for long....for Zarqaish...." Maternal love had aroused in her heart. Her brothers and sisters were silent but her mother's eyes welled up with tears of joy.

***No mind can assess the stature of Mother;
She's the essence of all greatness.***

Conscience

With the announcement of military operation, panic spread in the entire area. It gave rise to many questions in the minds of people, but no one could tell what the fate of this valley of flowers and fun and frolic would be. When children saw concern on the faces of their fathers, they were alarmed; and

when the noise of aircraft and reports of gunshots were heard, tears welled up in the eyes of the womenfolk and they looked up at the sky questioningly. Colours of the good old past flitted before the eyes of the hoary-headed. But these colours faded out on their dry lips and they remained silent.

Everyone tried to get out of this conflagration as soon as possible. The people neither cared for their village nor could they look back at their homes which they were leaving with their valuables in them for it was now the question of their life and death. As they were leaving their homes and hearths, the whole country grieved their lot – nay, this empathy spread beyond the geographical borders.

Millions of displaced persons, facing trials and tribulations, had to take refuge in makeshift camps. Now they were safe, but their tears did not stop for they couldn't forget their dead kinsfolk whom they had left lying shroudless under the open sky, while others were lamenting the fate of their little ones who were missing. The camps presented doomsday scenario. Sounds of groaning and moaning rose everywhere and every heart bled at the loss of their homes and hearths. It was followed by the influx of hordes of

onlookers. Some of them came to render service to the humanity while others visited the area to take political mileage out of their misery. The hapless refugees couldn't fathom the minds of these visitors.

For quite some time salt was added to the wounds of the calamity-stricken people. They were humiliated by their own country-folk. When the announcement was made that the stricken families would be provided financial aid, the Pukhtun nation's self-respect, dignity, decency and sense of pride were put to the test and, as before, they lost the gamble and Hazrat Bacha Khan's dictum that "Pukhtun can resist any temptation but not money," proved true. Many honourable people lost their national pride by stooping low. Rules of Registration were blatantly violated. In order to grab more money, five member families registered themselves as twenty member units. Well-off people usurped the rights of the poor and resourceless orphans and widows. The great sacrifices of those who had left everything and were now at the mercy of circumstances were flouted.

Sher Wali who, until recently, lamented the loss of his land, and who was very proud of being a man of conscience, also

fell a victim to the lust for money. He was a high-paid official in the Social Welfare Department and had been provided government accommodation in the city. But greed so overpowered him that he stifled the voice of his conscience and got himself registered as a poor, homeless person.

He could neither resist the temptation of money nor the free rations provided to the refugees; and when he learnt that journalists were also provided financial aid, he posed as one and got the money by submitting forged documents. It was thus that he blackened his face. He kept indulging in these unethical activities but never once paused to ponder why he was being so mean. Though he was affiliated with religious groups, he had forgotten religion, Pukhtun dignity and self-respect.

Whenever he was reminded of his meanness, he would laugh and say, "Who cares?" But he was soon caught at it. When, one day, he was happily returning home with his pockets stuffed with the money he had robbed from the poor, he was told that his young son had been killed in aerial firing. Ration fell from his hands, his body began to shake and the money he had so proudly acquired through unfair means flashed across

his mind, he thought of the facilities provided to him by his Department and the shameless fraud he had committed. Feeling guilty, he headed home with heavy steps.

When he reached his gate, he heard the wailings of his womenfolk. His wife was saying, "I told him several times not to feed us on ill-gotten wealth...He usurped the rights of the poor which cost him his son..." He heard all this with his head bent down. Then tears began to roll down his dark cheeks and disappeared in his moustache. He heaved a cold sigh, looked up at the sky and heard a voice: "Allah forgives everything but not the rights of fellow beings." He shuddered. Feelings of repentance began to prick his conscience. And when he looked at his son, he burst into tears. His wife said, "Why are you crying now? Go and deprive the orphans of their food and rob the rights of the widows so that you're deprived of your wife as well....Go and bring home more ill-gotten wealth...." These words fell upon him like thunderbolts....While he was crying over the dead body of his son, people around him looked at one another in amazement.

LAYAQ ZADA LAYAQ'S PUBLICATIONS:

1. Mehnat Ka Phal (Urdu), 1975. A story for kids, published in his school time.
2. Gilay (Pashto), 1978. First poetic collection of his 'crazy thoughts' which appeared in his college time.
3. Wikh Khoboona (Pashto), 1981. Second collection of his poems, published in his university time.
4. Gul Bano Zafar Khan (Pashto), 1982. A versified folk tale of Upper Swat.
5. Swallu Alaihi Wa Aalihi (Pashto), 1989. His first versified tribute to the Holy Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him). This book won Presidential Award which Layaq Zada Layaq received from the Ex-President of Pakistan, Late Ghulam Is'haq Khan in the year 1991.
6. Razai Che Bia Okhandu (Pashto), 1992. His collection of refined jokes whose second publication appeared in 2006.
7. Sta Pa Noom (Pashto), 1993. Second collection of his poems.
8. Daalai (Pashto). This collection of his contains selected poems by Abdul Hameed Baba and Ali Khan Baba which convey identical views.

9. Poetic Collection of Ahmad Din Talib (Pashto). The renowned poet, Ahmad Din Talib's collection of poems, including detailed foreword, research work and his latest poems.

10. Okhki aw Lambay (Pashto), 1997. Pashto translation by Layaq Zada Layaq of Salim Gardezi's Urdu book, "Me Ne Kashmir Jaltay Dekha". It is a moving account of the blood-soaked events in Kashmir. It was published with a detailed foreword.

11. Mashkanay (Pashto), 2002. Layaq Zada's third collection of poems, including odes, prose poems and quatrains.

12. Lewantob (Pashto), 2005. A collection of Layaq Zada's odes, prose poems and quatrains. Its second and third editions were published in 2006 and 2007, respectively.

13. Jalway (Pashto), 2006. A collection of Layaq Zada's modern tributary poems to the Holy Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him), which was awarded by Shaukat Aziz, former Prime Minister of Pakistan, and its author was sent for Umra by the Government of Pakistan.

14. Lewanai Sadaray (Pashto), 2008. A collection of Layaq Zada's selected film and non-film songs and poems which have won a prominent place in Pashto literature.

15. Dr Kabir Storay's Life and Struggle (Pashto), 2008. It contains an assessment of Late Dr Kabir Storay of Upper Pukhtunkhwa's life and national service by several writers, intellectuals and enlightened thinkers of great standing.

16. Ma Hera Walay Na Shay (Pashto), 2008. A collection of Layaq Zada's odes in short metre, including two "crazy songs".

17. Aey Gumbad-e-Khizra (Pashto). A poetic collection of Layaq Zada's homage to the Holy Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him). It was written in Haram Sharif (Makkah) and each poem in this collection provides great solace to the poet's heart and soul.

18. Mata Aaina (Pashto). A collection of Layaq Zada's short stories. Each story in this collection is steeped in tears and is a must read. Three editions of this book have been published so far.

19. The Broken Mirror. English translation of Layaq Zada's "Mata Aaina" by Prof. Ahmad Farid.

**I have authored several books of note,
But I'm still alien to the art of poetry.**

- Layaq Zada Layaq

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Mata Aaina

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