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from Sleepwalkers

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On Writing Sleepwalkers

On a visit to Karachi in the mid-eighties, I found I had come to a wonderland. All its people were walking, talking, or whatever, in deep sleep. What was most amazing was that the wonderland looked very familiar! There were so many Uttar Pradesh towns there—situated, I felt, even in the same geographical dimensions. As for the people—they spoke the chaste Urdu that reminds one of pre-Partition days, when it was spoken more for aesthetic pleasure than for communicating. I would often turn to look questioningly at my host, Muhammad Ali Siddiqui, a fellow writer in Urdu. The literary critic in him would shrug his shoulders and say, “Well, I would be grateful if *you* could explain our melodrama to me.”

Ali is, in fact, the original of Ishaq Mirza, whom I conceived before any other character in *Khwabrau* (Sleepwalkers) and whose forthright bearing provided me with the ending of the novel for which I had to work out the beginning. I found Ali completely involved, like Ishaq, in the here and now—unlike most other Karachi mohajirs, who cannot live their present except in the past tense.

Ali took me to Amroha, Gorakhpur, Meerut, even Malihabad. You won't believe what followed. Before he ventured to take me into the thick of Karachi, he abruptly stopped and said with a gleeful sneer, “From here we shall go forth and witness the grandeur of our great Lucknow...”

As in India, so in Karachi. The scene led us into the same stationary hubbub of Ameenabad of Lucknow. Roads come here, leisurely sauntering in from numerous directions, each with its cap tipped slightly on one side of the head. And just as they spot one another at the Chowk, they push themselves forward to become permanently frozen in an embrace. The immense Chowk presents the same clusters of poori-bhajiwalas, kababwalas, mithaiwalas. And when you have had a bellyful of these delicacies, a light-footed itrawala will approach you respectfully from nobody knows where. Ali eyed me, enjoying my disbelief. “Your whole Lucknow has walked away here into our Karachi, hasn't it? I wonder what's left there.”

“The Punjabis,” I told him, “who insist on speaking their Urdu in Punjabi!”

Once, well past midnight, Ali and I happened to visit a restaurant in the Lucknow of the mohajirs. The restaurant was as astir with activity then as it must have been in its peak hours. My friend remarked that “Lukhnavis” were in the habit of walking out of their dreams to come straight to the Chowk. He assured me that these sleepwalkers would keep popping in till the small hours. *Khwabrau* was thus born in my mind. And months later, when it became ripe for delivery, I prepared myself for what I knew would be a hassle-free labour.

People ask, Why did the mohajirs forsake their homes in India to migrate to Karachi?

And, why, when your home is on fire, don't you flee it to go elsewhere? Isn't this also how millions of Punjabis, who habitually knew a Hindustani to be one from outside Punjab, suddenly woke up from a nightmare to find themselves in Hindustan? A short story of mine, “Panaahgah” (The Shelter) seeks to depict how post-Partition communal clashes cast their shadows as far as today. In the story, middle-aged Mirasen is the only Muslim inhabitant left behind in a village in Hindustani Punjab after a terrible communal riot. She is disgraced, beaten, repeatedly raped. The poor ignorant woman does not even know where all of her kinsfolk have gone. “Why, we have packed them off to Pakistan!” her erstwhile non-Muslim friends jeer. “Why don't you follow them?” Her kith and kin have actually been temporarily moved to a refugee camp in a neighbouring town. Mirasen is one day found, unconscious with fever and fatigue, by the kindly Sarpanch who takes her in his oxcart to the camp. In the last lines of the story, she opens her eyes late in the evening in the pale electric light, and a young Hindu doctor of the camp affectionately asks her how she is. “Don't be scared, ma,” he adds softly, “you have arrived safely.” The illiterate Mirasen, moved by his care and kindness, says, “Please inform my people I have reached Pakistan too.”

The fact of the matter is that the migrants from India moved—wherever, whenever they did—to “Pakistan,” or “the sacred refuge.” But it is interesting to note that Nawab Mirza's wife in *Khwabrau*, for one, has fearful associations with the word “Pakistan.” She is afraid because her husband has to pass through “a Pakistani corridor” every day on his way to and from work. So while Mirasen is happy to have reached her Pakistan while still in India, Achhi Begum is apprehensive of a “Pakistani corridor” in her “Lucknow” in Karachi. The problem cannot, as we realize when we consider it in all its complexity, be resolved with a few impassioned strokes. Here I should perhaps also draw your attention to Sain Baba, a native of Sindh in *Khwabrau*. His poverty has made him a perfect refugee in his own land, running from town to town in search of his Pakistan. Deewane Maulvi Sahab pities the Sindhi Sain, believing in a rush of pure and plain madness that Sain has had to travel all the way from his native Sindh

to their Lucknow for mere food and shelter. The problem is thus intricate enough to be solved only with compassionate understanding.

Deewane Maulvi Sahab's emphatic belief that he has been continuously living in his old Lucknow all these years is perhaps pathetic; yet if this belief alone can serve as a divine cure for his malady, why shouldn't we grant him the privilege of madness? But when a sudden bomb explosion at Nawab Mahal takes away the lives of his wife, eldest son, and daughter-in-law, you find that the madman is no longer mad. He weeps bitterly on the shoulders of his Sindhi cook and comes out of his madness to discover that he is, after all these years, in Karachi. However, as we soon come to realize, it is only the nature of his madness that has changed. Now he believes that he is in Karachi to visit his son Ishaq Mirza and that he must hasten back to Achhi Begum in Lucknow.

Ishaq Mirza, his younger son, has always been aware of the trick that contemporary history has played with the mohajirs. He knows too well the reality of the myth of the Indian Lucknow in Karachi. And even though affection makes him indulgent towards the belief of his father, he is of the firm opinion that the Lucknow of Karachi can never be dragged back to its Indian origin and that the children who grow up here will have to suffer another mohajirat. This is why, when Deewane Maulvi Sahab asks his grandson, Salim, to get ready to go back to Lucknow, the lad, running after his ball, answers, "But *this* is Lucknow, Bade Abbu!"

I feel tempted to give a brief account of the situation. For the situation itself is what inspired me to attempt the novella. I dedicated it to my friend Muhammad Ali Siddiqui not merely as a gesture, but also because he provided me with my favourite character in the novel: Ishaq Mirza. Ali loves his Amroha in India, but would rather live in the Amroha of his children in Karachi, for they know no Indian Amroha except in their grandmother's tales.

Another friend, Anwar Sadeed, an eminent Urdu critic, has always wondered why *Khwabrau* was not written by a Pakistani. But then, isn't it natural that an Indian survivor of the tragic events of the history captured in the novel should be able to reproduce the anguish of the migrant sensibility and experience?

Like my Deewane Maulvi Sahab, I too had to flee my native land—Sialkot in Pakistan—during the din of Partition. Unlike the old man, I was then in my early twenties; yet as a child of very simple, unschooled old parents, I felt I had suddenly turned grey while taking charge of our dire circumstances beyond the borders in distant Bharat, with which we were familiar only through the slogans and speeches of political bigwigs. Suffer I did no less than Deewane Maulvi Sahab, the suffering having driven the old man out of his wits, and me to an insane pursuit of premature sanity. Anyone rooted securely for generations in the old country named anew could not have been in more sympathetic concord with migrant life than I

was. Muhammad Ali Siddiqui once took me to a thickly peopled wayside in Karachi and pointed to a gigantically calligraphed MOHAJIR, on a board as huge as the whole plaza where it had been fixed. I realized what he meant by doing that, and voluntarily associating it with my own Indian experience, I turned away rather madly.

I am reminded of another incident that supports my argument. A German Indologist visited me with her husband about the time I had just completed the novella. Reading a few pages of the manuscript while I was busy talking to her husband, she suddenly let out what sounded like a sob.

“Why?...” Alarmed, I asked her in my most persuasive voice.

“But this is *my* story,” the tear-stricken lady, restraining herself, said. “This is the story of all of us living on either side of the Berlin Wall. Let me tell you what happened to our family...”

I knew for certain that she was not feigning interest in my book. She had indeed gone through the same terrible experience in different circumstances. So, shall I say, it is not always the events but the emotional impact of events that accounts for literary authenticity. Except for the emotional felicity available to a writer, his writing will, despite possessing absolutely correct details, fail to be creatively substantial. I do believe I am no other than Deewane Maulvi Sahab of *Khwabrau*, and living here in India, I did experience every detail of his life in Pakistan. In this specific context, therefore, my dear friend Anwar Sadeed should regard me as a fellow Pakistani.