

HASAN MANZAR

White Man's World

IN THOSE DAYS many things had gathered in my mind. They are there even now. I think the minds of all of us children were full of inquiries. We would ask each other questions about some of the things, or we would approach the grown-ups. Mostly the grown-ups didn't have time to listen to us. Even when they did answer our questions, they alone seemed satisfied with the explanations they gave us; we knew that they didn't know the real answers.

Take, for example, this question: When a person dies and we dig a deep hole in the ground and leave him there under a pile of earth, who comes to him?

Angels?

But I knew that neither I nor any of the grown-ups had ever seen any angels. And, then, when someone was buried under a pile of dirt and shut tightly inside a wooden box, how could any angel get inside to talk to him and carry him to the Heavenly Father? These were all lies.

My older sister is very fond of reading. She lies on her stomach all the time to read her story-books. When I am on speaking terms with her, she sometimes reads a story to me and to my younger sister. She has a whole library of books. Now I, too, have a few books. When we have a house of our own—Mommy and Papa say we're going to have one, one day—then I, too, shall have my own library.

Most of the books my sister has are children's detective novels. Or they are stories of four people, one of whom is always a woman, who go on a mission, assigned them by a person or a government, and, in the end, come back home after blowing up a big building or a bridge.

“Safēd Ādmī kī Dunyā,” from his collection *Ribā'ī* (Hyderabad: Āgahī Publications, 1981), pp. 78–101.

What the word “government” meant I did not know then. I’m still not quite sure. It was something that was for the grown-ups, not for the children. It was the thing that transferred Papa from one place to another and did many other things, which I shall talk about later.

So, as I was saying, my sister has quite a few books; of these many are by Enid Blyton. Sometimes my sister and Mommy have an argument. My sister says that no one can write a better story than Enid Blyton, and that the greatest book in the world is *Heidi*, but Mommy says that there are many great writers in the world—Tolstoy, Thomas Mann, and Dostoviskido ... I could never get that name right. Mommy once told me a story by that man, and I thought it was a good story. There was an old woman in that story who was very miserly, and a student who never had enough money to eat and who used to sell some things to that old woman. One day the student made a plan and murdered her, and nobody could find out who had killed her. In the end the boy himself went and told everybody that he was the murderer of the old woman. The story was called *Crime and Punishment*. The old woman in the story reminds me of my grandmother who lives in Pretoria in South Africa.

I hate my grandmother. She lives all alone in a house which is in an area meant only for the houses of the rich. She proudly says that only the whites live in her area, no Asians or Africans.

That is why I cannot stand her. Besides, she has hardly ever given me anything. Once, long ago, when we visited Pretoria, she gave me a battery-operated jet plane. The jet used to make the kind of noise planes make when they take off. On its starboard side it had a green light and on the port side a red one, perhaps. It would move on the ground and, after a while, make a breaking sound and then stop.

This goes far back in the past when I was really small. But even now, when we go to see her, she reminds me of that gift, and says, “Remember, young man, the beautiful jet plane I gave you? Where is it now? Does it still work?”

On a wink from Papa I have to say, “Yes, Grandma, I still have that plane and it still works beautifully.” Actually, I’ve even forgotten what it looked like and what side of it had which light.

The old lady always asks my mother, “Where are you people finally going to settle?” I know the meaning of the word “settle.” It means to build a house somewhere and to stay there forever, as the old lady has done herself. Then she asks, “Are you going to Australia? Why not Canada? Hank could even find a place for himself in the States.”

Hank is my father’s name.

My grandfather was Dutch and grandmother Afrikaaner. Perhaps they hated each other all their life. My grandfather spent the greater part of his life in Indonesia, just so he would be away from my grandmother. I've heard Mommy and Papa whisper that my grandfather, later in his life, had started living with a woman who was not white. This was one of those things which stayed in my mind in those days and which raised a number of questions. Why did my grandfather do that and, if he did, what was wrong with it? I had also heard that the government did not allow him and that woman to live in South Africa, and that once, in Durban, when they were traveling together in a taxi, they were taken to a police station because the two of them had different skin colors, and the government didn't like that. Things are not that way in this country where we live. Here, a Negro woman and an Indian man, or a Negro man and a British woman can go together wherever they want to—to the movies, to the circus, or just for a stroll, holding each other's hands, as Mommy and Papa often do before sunset. I like to watch them when they do that. They seem to be in love with each other. When I grow up and get married, I too would sometimes like to go out with my wife in the same way. My wife's hand would be around my back, as Mommy's is around Papa's, and my hand will go behind her neck and rest on her far shoulder. But what worries me is that if she is taller than me, then walking like that may not be possible.

Anyway, there is a government in the South—Mommy and Papa call South Africa “South”—as well as here in this country where we live.

Once I remember seeing my grandmother panting and breathing hard, as if she were trying to hold back her anger, and saying to Papa, “I don't care a hoot where your father is, or if he is dead or alive. He was low and that is what he proved by living with a dark woman. Sin or no sin, the important thing is that he lived with a dark woman.”

I knew what the word “dark” meant: people are afraid of the dark and of things that are dark like the night. In the school plays I've seen the devil wearing black clothes and black make-up. This continent, where we live, used to be called the Dark Continent. I imagine that long ago people used to live in big caves, and since there was no electricity, they were afraid of coming out at night, as people still are in this small town where we live and where there is no electricity. People don't walk around at night because they are afraid of snakes and big scorpions, some as big as my two hands put together, and of lions and hyenas. But me, I'm not afraid of the dark, nor do I fear black people.

One day when my father and I were going for a morning stroll, with

our dog Mishka in tow, I asked him, “Papa, why don’t we live in the South?” Papa knocked down some *neem* fruit for me from a tree with his walking stick and said, “Do you want to live there?” “No,” I replied, “but even then, ...” and started nibbling at my *neem* fruit quietly. Mishka sniffed the bitter *neem* berries and then went into the bush after some animal, perhaps a jungle rat.

Once again I asked, “Papa, is Grandpa really a low man?”

“No,” he answered, so firmly that I was convinced that he really meant what he said. “No, your grandpa was not low; in fact, he was a great man.” Then, after a pause, he added, “I say ‘was’ because he has now passed away.”

I couldn’t quite figure out what to say to a grown-up at such a time. Obviously, I couldn’t pat my father on the head, as he does when I’m sad or when Tina or Fiona is; nor could I ask him to bend down so that I might pat him. I couldn’t even say to him, “Please don’t feel sad.”

It was a beautiful morning. Mishka had once again joined me, and the sun had just come up on our right from behind the sheet of mist.

Suddenly I asked, “Papa, why did the government not allow Grandpa to live in the South with that other woman?”

In embarrassment he answered, “Perhaps there wasn’t enough room for more people there.”

I knew he was lying because at night Mommy would often read an ad from her medical journal and say to Papa: “Here’s another one of those ads: EMIGRATING TO SOUTH AFRICA?” This journal was published in England, and I had heard that ad many times: IF YOU ARE LEAVING FOR SOUTH AFRICA, CANADA, AUSTRALIA, OR THE UNITED STATES, WE CAN LOOK AFTER THE PACKING AND SHIPPING OF YOUR HOUSEHOLD EFFECTS.

It seems as if the whole world is being invited to settle down in South Africa, but there is no room there for my grandpa and a dark woman.

This situation is like a private joke with our family. Every house has some bits of stories whose mention amuses every member of the household. In our house this is what makes both Mommy and Papa laugh. Little Fiona laughs, too, although she is so stupid and doesn’t even remember meeting our grandmother. On such occasions Papa utters a word: “hypocrites.”

When I asked Mommy about that word, she said it is used for a person whose beliefs and acts do not match.

But Fiona still regards hypocrite to be a big animal like a hippo, or even bigger than a hippo, like the animals we often see in the rivers here, who sometimes overturn boats.

So, that morning, when I, Papa, and Mishka were returning from our walk, I asked him, "Papa, if I grow up and marry a Negro or a dark woman, would it be something bad?"

Papa laughed and said, "No, it won't be bad. Do you like dark girls?" I nodded.

Then teasingly he asked, "So when are you getting married?"

"Not right now," I answered, and both of us laughed.

How we came to this small town is yet another interesting story. Papa had been transferred here from Sierra Leone. Upon coming to this country we stayed for a few days in a hotel in the Capital. As South Africa is simply known as the South, the main city here is called the Capital. When this word is used, everyone knows what city is being talked about.

Then when the government ordered Papa to start working in this small town, we went to the Capital's railway station. The place looked deserted, and a big carriage which had once been used by some members of the British royalty stood in the middle of the waiting room. A small metal plaque with some inscription on it had been fixed in a cement block nearby.

Tina read the inscription and said that during some year in the 1800s an English king and a queen had visited the city in this carriage.

I heard Mommy say to Papa, "They should do away with these memorabilia."

I didn't quite understand her last word, but I didn't want to ask Tina for fear she would begin putting on airs.

Later, when we boarded the train, we met a white woman who was already seated in the compartment. She looked at Mommy, heaved a sigh of relief, and said to the two men who had come to see her off, "Thank God. I think I will be able to sleep in peace."

Tina picked up her book of stories and went up to the upper berth. Fiona started rubbing her nose against the window pane and watching outside, and I waited for the train to move so that I might start talking to Mommy and Papa. In the noise of the train I would be able to talk freely, and that woman wouldn't hear our conversation.

I knew well what Tina was reading. Most of the stories she used to read those days I've read by now; the rest she has told me about. That day she was reading stories by Tolstoy. One of these stories was about a farmer named Pakhom who had a little land and was happy. But then he became greedy and started buying more and more land in order to become rich. At last he decided to go to the country of the Bashkirs where land could be had for free. There was only one condition: after leaving in

the morning he would have to return before sunset to the place from which he started; all the land that he walked around would become his. But the devil put greed in Pakhom's heart, and he decided to circle a huge piece of land. He walked so much during the day that when he returned to the Chieftain of the Bashkirs, the sun was already setting. He fell on the ground as he came near the Chief. The Chief said, "Now here is a real man. See how much land he has acquired!" But when Pakhom's servant tried to lift him up Pakhom spat blood and died. So the servant had to dig a grave and bury him. At this point in the story, Tina would declaim, "From the top of his head to the soles of his feet, all the land he really needed was six feet."

Tina would say this as if she were delivering the Sunday sermon from the pulpit, and as if I were someone greedy like Pakhom who had to bow his head and listen humbly. The story was called "How Much Land Does a Man Require?"

I had made up my mind long ago to read the story myself, for I felt that Tina twisted the facts, or that, perhaps, she had in her the makings of a church-going, religious woman. I would have to find out for myself how much land a man really needs.

The train was about to leave when an Asian woman, almost at a run, holding a baby in her arms, approached our compartment. Behind her was her Negro servant who was carrying an older child in his arms. A girl almost my age walked into the compartment, all the while talking to the coolie.

On seeing this crowd, the white woman at first panicked and said "Oh, no!" But when she heard the Asian woman speak to the coolie in English, she calmed down a bit.

The coolie placed the luggage in the compartment and left. The Asian woman and her family occupied one full berth. The Negro servant also sat on one edge of the berth.

The train whistled.

The white woman, confused and angry, pointed towards the Negro servant and asked the Asian lady, "He is not going to stay in this compartment, is he?"

The Asian woman answered her in English, "His seat is also reserved in this compartment."

"No," she said sternly. "He is not to travel in this compartment."

She called the Negro guard who happened to be standing outside our compartment waving a green flag and commanded him, "Stop the train. Please."

The Negro guard brought the green flag down, pulled out the red flag from under his armpit, waved it in the air, and came towards us. The creaking sound that the wheels had made as the train started abruptly came to a halt, and an argument started between the white and the Asian woman. The Negro boy cringed helplessly in his corner; even the railway guard seemed helpless.

The Asian woman explained, "I'm ill, and I need this servant to look after my children. That's why I've got him a reservation in this compartment."

"No, he cannot travel in this compartment," the white woman said as if she were ordering one of her servants.

"Why not?" the Asian woman finally asked in the same tone.

"Because ... because ..." she hesitated and said, "because the servants travel in a separate class."

I knew she wanted to say something else—"because he is a Negro"—but living in the land of the Negroes, she couldn't well have said it.

The Asian woman said, "Well, madam, if this bothers you so much, you can change your compartment. And, in any case, he is not taking your space."

The white woman looked towards Mommy, as if expecting her to say something on her behalf, but at that very moment, Papa started playing with the youngest child of the Asian lady, and Mommy took out bars of chocolate from her purse and started distributing them to the children and to the Negro boy.

I knew this was Mommy's silent response to the white woman.

The white woman looked like she was about to have a fit of weeping.

Her two companions who were still waiting on the platform looked at us with a scowl. One of them started helping her down from the train, and the other picked up her luggage. I heard one of them say to her, "You can go by air, *mi'daire*."

But I'm sure the Negro guard found her room in some other compartment because, as the train left, I saw the two men leave the platform without her.

After this little incident our journey was pleasant, and we came to this town which does not have electricity or tap water. But Mommy, Papa, I, Tina, Fiona—each of us likes this place because we can move around alone wherever we want to and because everyone here knows everyone else—the Negroes, the Asians, the white people, and even those whose skin is yellow like the underbelly of a gecko, but who have short

crinkly hair.

I've heard people say that the mothers of these people were Negroes, and their fathers Europeans who, when the British rule came to an end, went back to Europe.

How can that be possible? This, too, was one of those things that stayed in my mind and bothered me. How can a father leave his children and go away forever? Once when I asked Tina this question, she answered as grown-ups often do: "Strange, isn't it?"

I knew that she did not want to answer my question, or that she did not herself know the answer. She would argue with me on such matters only when she had something to say to me to shut me up, something she had perhaps read in a book some days ago. At such times, her manner of speech would always become that of the grown-ups.

One day when Papa was away on a tour and Mommy was busy looking after her patients at home, Tina came to me and whispered, "Do you want to see someone being buried?"

"Who died?" I asked impatiently. "Let's go."

She put her finger on her lips to keep me quiet and answered, "A driver from Papa's team."

"Which one?" I asked eagerly.

"You'll see soon enough," she said and motioned me to follow her.

Tina had no school that day. Fiona was outside playing with the dog, and we were afraid the two of them might want to accompany us if they smelled us. But Tina had the whole trip carefully planned in her mind. At that time she looked more like one of the characters from her adventure stories than the sister I knew.

We left the main road and walked through a corn field, and entered the hospital, which was about a mile away from our house, by climbing the boundary wall.

At a little distance from the hospital was a deserted building whose door had a lock on it. She took me to that building. Standing on her toes, she peered into each of the windows and then asked me to look inside one window.

Inside, on a white tiled table, lay one of Papa's drivers, the one who had brought me a pet monkey a few days ago.

There was blood on the table. The top of the man's head seemed to have been cut open and then stitched with thread. Tina said that that morning when his two wives went to wake him up, he was lying dead in bed, and Mommy had said that an autopsy was to be done on him before he could be buried.

I asked her what “autopsy” meant, even though in doing so I had to hide my humiliation.

“It means to find out if he was poisoned and that’s why he never woke up from his sleep. But Mommy says he had a heart attack. She found that out after he was cut open. That’s autopsy. His body has been sewed back again.”

I moved away from the window. I didn’t want Tina to know that I was feeling scared. His burial was some time away, so we came back home.

An hour or so later Tina came to me again and said, “Come on.”

Going through the corn field, we walked towards the Muslim graveyard.

We could see the whole scene from behind the thick shrubs. I saw Papa standing, looking downcast, among the people who were gathered there, and, in a way, I felt relieved that our stealthy trip would not be discovered, for we had left Mommy and Fiona asleep at home, and Papa was standing there, right in front of us.

The driver’s body, wrapped in a white cloth, lay on a wooden plank. Blood was still oozing out of the white cloth.

Two men nearby were digging a pit. The red soil which they had shoveled out lay in two mounds on both sides.

Then some of the people filed together in a straight line and went through what Tina later told me was the final service for the man, whatever that meant.

Papa and some men stayed on one side while this service was going on. I knew the reason for this, but Tina also told me. Papa was a Christian, while the driver and those who had come to bury him were Muslims.

Some chameleons moved about in the bush around us, but I was more afraid of the red ants which were close by.

A little later, the people picked up the driver’s body wrapped in the cloth and placed it inside the pit. Then they spread some banana leaves on the body and began shoveling in the soil that had been taken out earlier. Soon the two mounds disappeared. In their place now there was a long grave around which the people stood. Everyone, including Papa, raised his hands to say a prayer.

Tina once again looked at me the way she does when she wants to show that she alone knows all the secrets of the world, and whispered in my ear, “Six feet. See? From his head to his toes, that was all the land he needed.”

I was grateful to Tina for having brought me there to watch the burial, but even then I hated her sermonizing.

In the evening, in Tina's presence, I asked Mommy, "Was Tolstoy really a great writer, Mommy?"

Tina's ears turned crimson.

Mommy said, "Yes. He was truly great."

"Even greater than Johanna Spyri and Enid Blyton?"

Mommy seriously said, "Maybe not yet, but when you grow up, perhaps he may also grow with you to become a greater writer than Johanna Spyri and Enid Blyton."

"And whatever he writes, is it absolutely true?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Is it, then, true that a man needs only six feet of land?"

"In a way, yes, it's true."

I think Tina had started sweating by this time, but she did not move from her seat.

"Then, why...?" I stopped.

"Why what?" Mommy asked in an exploring tone.

"Oh, nothing," I tried to evade the subject.

"It seems there *is* something," Papa joined in the conversation for the first time.

He had been quiet since the evening. The driver's sudden death had obviously touched him. The driver and Papa had been together on many long trips through the dense forest which is dark even in daytime, and where one is afraid of attacks by wild animals and by the enemy tribesmen who might recognize the driver by the marks on his face and try to kill him. In such situations, Papa would take over the wheel and the driver would hide between the seats in the back. At eating time, if the driver's food was finished, he would start eating from Papa's plate—if Papa wasn't eating pig's meat—and sometimes even Papa shared the driver's food.

I knew that, like me, Papa was also feeling sad because, in the afternoon, the two of us had been patting the back of the monkey the driver had given me.

Then I almost exploded, "It's all lies, all lies."

Mommy and Papa looked at each other.

"What's all lies?" Mommy asked me. "Do you mean all that Tolstoy has written?" she asked again, politely.

"Has anything happened?" Mommy then asked Tina.

Tina bowed her head.

“Okay, okay. We’ll talk about it after supper,” Papa said.

I wasn’t sure if I was sad and crying or just angry. Also, if I was angry, was it at Tolstoy or at Tina? And if I was sad and crying, was it at the driver’s death or some other thing?

Images of people—my grandmother, the white woman whom we had met in the train for a while, and dozens of others—were floating in my mind.

I recalled the words of the Sunday morning sermons in our Church and all those things I had heard in the car during our night-long travel last summer from Pretoria to Durban, when we last met grandmother. At our departure she had said to Papa, “Hank, you are welcome to come back here anytime you want. This is the only country in the world where the settlers had only one ideal—that when they sit outside on the steps of their houses, they should not see the smoke rising from the chimney of their nearest neighbor’s house.”

During that journey a friend of Papa’s was driving the car. Papa sat in the front seat, and Mommy, I, Fiona, and Tina were in the back. At night time, on a long stretch of road which went smoothly for miles and miles, who could have stayed awake for long?

The hills which during the day seemed wrapped in the green velvety grass were hidden by the darkness. Once in a while the headlights would show where one or another began to rise from the roadside.

We were passing through familiar cities and towns—Colenso, Ladysmith, Pietermeritzburg, all of which were quiet.

The houses of the white Afrikaaner farmers stood quietly on the farms, miles away from each other. In one corner of each kraal, very close together, were the quarters of each farmer’s servants.

Even during the day I had found the streets of Pietermeritzburg deserted. At night they seemed even more frightening, even though they were lit. They seemed to have been made empty of people.

After talking for a while, Mommy had gone to sleep. Fiona had been asleep since the journey began, and Tina couldn’t keep awake for long, for she couldn’t read.

Papa and his friend were the only ones talking. They were speaking in low tones, saying things which were altogether new for me. For instance, they said that when the settlements in the South had just begun, some woman had written in her journal that the policy of equality for blacks and whites was against the teachings of the Bible.

What “policy” meant I did not know, but I knew that what the Sunday sermons in our town said was different from what that woman

had written.

Another thing they talked about was the belief among the white people in the South that it was against God's laws to give equal rights to blacks and whites, and that it was every free man's birthright to acquire as much land as he wanted.

Much of what they said at that time I couldn't understand fully, but, as always, I enjoyed listening to Papa. Even his friend talked like him.

They talked about the original peoples of Australia, about the American Indians, about the Israelis who had come from Europe and about the Jews who were non-Europeans.

I felt as if all the countries of the world had been taken over by the white people, each one of whom was running, like Pakhom, to possess as much land as he could, even if in the effort he had to destroy the Negroes, the American Indians, and many other darker races of the world.

I woke up when the car stopped at Durban. In the early light of the day I saw Papa's friend shaking hands with him and with Mommy.

Before leaving, he said, "So, Hank, not coming back to this gorgeously beautiful suffocating country?"

Papa said, "No, thanks. But you look after yourself."

Some time later we came to know that that friend of Papa's had been sent to prison.

After supper Fiona was sent upstairs, and Papa and Mommy listened to Tina tell them about her little adventure of the day, the adventure in which she had been the leading figure. By that time I had overcome my anger or whatever it was that had made me feel so miserable earlier. I was in control of myself.

"So, what is it, son?" Mommy asked me.

"What?" I asked.

"What has your adventure of the day got to do with Tolstoy?"

Hesitatingly, I repeated the things I had heard during our car journey from Pretoria. Mommy and Papa watched me in amazement. I think they felt proud of my good memory.

Then, suddenly, I asked them the question that I had been meaning to ask since that afternoon, "Maybe, as you say, Tolstoy has written good stories, but I think Tina lies when she says that a man, from his head to his toes, really needs only six feet of land. My question is: How much land does a white man need?"

—*Translated by Faruq Hassan*