

SHAMOEL AHMAD

The Dressing Table

EVEN THE PROSTITUTES were not spared during the riots....

Brijmohan could only lay his hands on Naseem Jaan's dressing table. It had a life-size mirror inside an ivory frame. Brijmohan's daughters loved to look at their reflections in the mirror frequently. On the frame there were stains of hair oil, nail polish and lipstick which gave it a run-down look.

Brijmohan was surprised to see the change in his daughters.... They hadn't shown any inclination to look at themselves in a mirror before or to pretty themselves up in any way ... In the past they had also stood out on the balcony, but not in quite the same way.... Now, even Chhoti—the youngest one—plastered her face with talcum powder and lipstick, and laughed out loud standing on the balcony.

That day again the three of them were out on the balcony amusing themselves. Standing quietly on the road Brijmohan was watching their antics. Suddenly, Bari, the eldest one, stretched her arms, prominently displaying the contours of her breasts. Manjhli, the middle one, bent over to look down and then started scratching her back. As if on cue, a young man standing in front of the paan kiosk smiled and looked up at the balcony. Chhoti nudged Manjhli and all three of them broke into laughter. Brijmohan's heart began to sink with a vague fear.... The premonitions he had were turning out to be true ... after all....

He had experienced this fear on the very day he had robbed Naseem Jaan of her dressing table. There was a veritable pandemonium when the rioters entered the prostitutes' quarters. Brijmohan and his companions barged into Naseem Jaan's kotha. She screamed and cried out at the top of her lungs. When Brijmohan began carrying the dressing table down, she fell at his feet pleading for kindness.

“Brother ... this is an heirloom. Please let it be ... dear brother.”

“Get lost ... you whore!” Brijmohan gave her a forceful shove with his legs sending her reeling to the ground. Her sari came up to her hips. But she soon regained her wits and again began clinging to Brijmohan.

“Brother, this is a memento from my grandma.... Brother...!”

This time Brijmohan gave her a whopping kick on her waist. It was so painful that Naseem Jaan doubled up and fell to the ground. The buttons of her blouse came off and her breasts began to dangle. Brijmohan flashed his knife.

“I’ll slash them!”

Terrified, Naseem Jaan covered her breasts with her hands and cowered in a corner. Brijmohan proceeded to go down the stairs with the dressing table.

As he was descending the stairs, he felt immensely pleased with himself that he had been able to rob Naseem Jaan of a family heirloom. Surely, it was a prized possession of the family. Her great-grandmother must have been accustomed to looking at herself in the mirror attached to it. Her grandmother and mother must have decked themselves out before it to entice their clients. Brijmohan felt happy thinking that Naseem Jaan might buy a better dressing table, but she could never get this one back.... He thought to himself that the other rioters involved in looting and plundering must also be experiencing this pleasurable feeling knowing they were at the vanguard of a plot designed to rob a community of its heritage.

When Brijmohan reached home, his wife took a special liking to the dressing table. She thought the glass was somewhat cloudy so she began to clean it with a wet rag. The mirror was covered with dust and had oil stains here and there. As she cleaned the surface, it began to sparkle. Brijmohan’s wife was delighted. Turning from side to side, she looked at herself in the mirror from all angles. Her daughters also went through the same exercise.

For Brijmohan too there was something about his full reflection in the mirror that looked attractive and appealing to him. It seemed as if there was something special about the mirror. He wanted to go on looking at his image for some time. However, the image of Naseem Jaan crying and cringing appeared before his eyes.

“Brother, don’t take away the dressing table. It’s a memento from my grandma....”

“Get lost ... you whore!” Brijmohan shook his head violently two or three times and went away from the mirror.

Brijmohan installed the dressing table in his bedroom. Now, no one ever looked at the old dressing table. Everyone seemed to have fallen in love with the new one. At any given moment, some member of the family or other could be found standing in front of it. Brijmohan often wondered what secret lay behind the whore's dressing table that it drew every beholder to it irresistibly. His daughters were glued to it and his wife gazed at her reflection from different angles. Even he himself.... However, for him it was difficult to stand face-to-face with it for a long time. Naseem Jaan would begin to wail and scream sending his mind into a whirl.

Brijmohan felt that each member of the family was changing subtly. His wife now swung her hips when she walked and used *missi* on her lips. His daughters began to tie payals on their feet and spent a lot of time dressing themselves up in novel ways. They began to put on lipstick, paint their eyes with kohl and their foreheads with tikas, and they drew moles on their cheeks. A paandan had also been bought, and with every evening came flowers and wreaths. Early in the evening Brijmohan's wife would sit with the paandan, cracking betel nuts and indulging in amusements with everyone. Brijmohan watched everything like a spectator. He was so amazed that he had become silent.... Why didn't he say anything? ... Why didn't he reproach them?

One day when Brijmohan was in his room, Bari came and planted herself in front of the dressing table. She looked at herself from the right and left and then began to loosen her brassier. She lifted her left arm and touched the hair in the armpit with the fingers of her other hand. Then she took out some lotion from the drawer of the dressing table and began to apply it on that spot. Brijmohan was in a terrible state. He observed his daughter's antics without a word. Meanwhile Manjhli appeared too, followed closely by Chhoti.

"Didi ... give me the lotion...."

"What do you want it for?" Bari teased her.

"Didi will use it in the bathroom...." Chhoti volunteered.

"Get lost...." Manjhli pinched Chhoti's cheeks and all three began to laugh.

Brijmohan's heart started to beat quickly from some unknown fear.... His daughters' toilet habits had changed entirely.... And they didn't care at all that he was in the room! He changed his position in the bed so his reflection could be seen in the mirror but his daughters seemed not to notice. Bari continued rubbing the lotion on while the other two stood beside her making faces in the mirror.

To Brijmohan it seemed as though he had no importance in the house anymore. Suddenly Naseem Jaan was smiling at him in the mirror.

“I’m important in the house now.”

Brijmohan was stunned. It seemed as though Naseem Jaan had come into his house along with her dressing table and would one day spread into every nook and cranny.

He wanted to go out but his feet seemed to be stuck in the ground. He couldn’t budge from where he was and kept staring at the dressing table while his daughters were laughing heartily. For a moment, in the midst of these playful girls, it felt as though he wasn’t their father but...

Brijmohan was now afraid of the dressing table. Naseem Jaan laughed in it.... She laughed when Bari tinkled her bangles ... she laughed when Chhoti jingled her payals. And now Brijmohan....

That day also his daughters were standing on the balcony and laughing. Brijmohan watched them as his heart filled with uncertain fear. He thought that passersby had also begun to stop to look at the balcony. Suddenly a youth standing in front of the paan kiosk made a gesture. The girls also made some gestures in response and he smiled. Brijmohan felt like asking the young man his name. He went towards the kiosk, but as he came close to it he fell silent. He thought he was taking the same kind of interest in the young man as his daughters.... He wondered why he wanted to know his name. What were his intentions after all? Would he take him to his daughters? An enigmatic smile played on his lips for a second. He put the roll of paan into his mouth, took a comb out of his pocket and began to run it through his hair looking into the mirror hanging there. This act brought him some relief. He looked sideways at the young man. He was talking softly to a rickshaw-driver and looking up at the balcony now and then. As Brijmohan put his comb back in his pocket, he admitted to himself that he was drawn to the youth. Were his values also ... oonh ... to hell with values. What kind of values did he have that made him rob a prostitute ... a prostitute! How she had cried! Brother ... brother mine...! Naseem Jaan’s voice rang in his ears all over again. Brijmohan shook his head in disgust. He looked up at the balcony, paid the paan-seller, and, after crossing the road, he went into his house.

Brijmohan went to his room and stood in front of the dressing table. He felt that his appearance had changed. His face had blotches on it and his eyes had deep purple shadows. He untied his dhoti, tied it again, and then ran his fingers over his blotches. He felt like putting kohl around his eyes and tying a red kerchief around his neck. He kept staring at his own image for some time. Then his wife came in. She had wrapped her sari

over her bra. As she stood in front of the dressing table the end of her sari slipped. She smiled coquettishly and winked at her husband to fasten the hook of her bra.

Brijmohan looked at the mirror. The breasts trapped in the bra tempted him. While fastening the hook his hands crept onto her breasts in spite of himself.

“Oui daiyya...!” Brijmohan’s wife doubled over leaving him in a strange state. He began to fondle her breasts vigorously.

“My king...!” She moaned. Blood began to course rapidly through his veins. He tore off the bra with a forceful jerk and took her to the bed. On the bed she clung to his body and began to laugh.

Brijmohan glanced at the mirror. His body began tingling as he looked at the naked body of his wife. He quickly took off his clothes. His wife whispered into his ear, “My king ... plunder your kingdom!”

Brijmohan had never heard his wife use such expressions before, expressions used only by prostitutes. It seemed to him that these weren’t words but sarangi tunes that were flowing out from Naseem Jaan’s kotha. And then ... the atmosphere became sensual ... the mirror clouded over ... and the sarangi tunes rang out.

Brijmohan got up from the bed, took the tin of kohl out of the drawer and painted his eyes with it. Then he tied wreaths around his wrists, fastened a red kerchief around his neck and went out. He stood against the wall near the landing and puffed at the biri he was smoking. □

—*Translated by M. Asaduddin*