

SAJJAD ZAHEER

## The Same Trouble ...\*

“RELIGION IS TRULY of the utmost importance. In trouble, in difficulty, in moments of vulnerability, when our mental faculties have failed us and our senses are paralyzed, when we search everywhere like a wounded animal, scared, looking helpless, then where does the strength come from to support our sinking hearts? From religion! And religion’s root is faith. Fear and faith. Religion can’t be defined adequately in words. We can’t understand it through reason. It’s an internal state-of-mind...”

“What did you say? An internal state-of-mind?”

“It isn’t a laughing matter—religion is a celestial light in the shadow of which we can glimpse the mysteries of the universe. This is an internal ...”

“For God’s sake, talk about something else. You don’t know anything about my internal state-of-mind at this moment. I have a bad stomach-ache, and right now I have no use for celestial light. I need a laxative....”

“One night, I was totally absorbed in reading a novel, when suddenly someone entered my room and stood before me. When I looked up, who did I see there but Monsieur Satan.

“I said, ‘Monsieur Satan! What’s the meaning of your coming here at this hour? I’m busy reading this very interesting novel. You want me to put this book down and have a religious debate with you, even though I don’t want to. Personally, I feel that reading a novel is more useful than wasting my energy on religious matters. And truth be told, I never want to be a victim of the doubt you’re trying to plant in my heart.’

“After I said this, that Satan-like being turned and started for the door. Behaving like this towards an angel was nagging at my conscience when that being turned towards me once and said with a disappointed voice:

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\*“Phir ye Hañgāma” originally appeared in *Añgāre* (Lucknow: Nizāmī Press, 1932). Translation from 1995 edition (Delhi: Taqsimkār, Ejūkeshnal Publishing Hā’us), 138–45.

'I'm not Satan—I'm Gabriel. I don't want to charge you with the mistake of calling me Satan. Satan is, after all, another angel like me. You're not even the worst—greater people than you have ushered me out of their homes thinking that I was Satan. Even Prophets have made this mistake. The fact is that I'm an angel of good. My face reveals holiness. Perhaps if I were as beautiful as Satan people wouldn't behave this way towards me. And how did you determine that I wanted to engage you in a religious debate? I have no interest in debates. Since every debate relies on the intellect and on logic, it is a Satanic thing. Religion's root is faith. If your faith is strong then God Himself will be on your side in a religious debate, and when you have the support of God with you, what's the point of the intellect? Religion is truly of the utmost importance....'"

Reason and faith, the heavens and the earth, man and the angels, God and Satan—what am I thinking about? The dry, parched earth is quenched by rainwater and strange, beautiful fragrances begin flowing from it. In a famine, people die of starvation. The elderly, the youth, the children, women, men, their sunken eyes, their pallid faces, their bones and ribs appearing as though they will pierce their wrinkled skin and protrude from their bodies. The pain of hunger, the illnesses of cholera, nausea, dysentery. Flies, death, no one to bury or burn the corpses, and the corpses putrefy and start to produce strange, horrible smells.

A foreign breed of dog was being kept at the home of a certain well-to-do gentleman. The dog's name was Lion. Every day he was fed adequately and he usually stayed indoors, in the inner courtyard. But sometimes he would run after the bitches on the street. As he grew, so did this habit of his. Whenever the skinny, weaker strays in the neighborhood saw Lion approaching, they would abandon their females and run off to bark back at him from a safe distance. Lion would stay with the females and not even give the strays a second thought. After some time, it just so happened that a stray about twice the size of Lion arrived in the neighborhood and was bent on fighting with Lion. He and Lion did fight a few times. During those fights, the females would run off and the strays, along with the leader of their pack, would attack Lion. Slowly, not only did Lion stop leaving his house, the pack of dogs began entering the yard to attack Lion inside his own home. And when attacks of this sort happened, the volume of the barking was such that you couldn't even hear something right next to you. The servants who were close by would race to rescue Lion from his enemies with great difficulty.

Lion was injured several times. Now he hid inside. The strays claimed total victory. One day, early in the morning, Lion was wandering in the

yard when the strays, under the leadership of the large dog, attacked him once again. Everyone was asleep inside the house, but the noise and commotion woke them. The rich gentleman who owned Lion came out and, seeing the ruckus, lifted his rifle. He aimed at the large stray, fired, and killed him on the spot. The other dogs ran away. Injured, Lion came and huddled close to his master's feet. The base, mean strays had been crushed. The respectable, well-bred, foreign dog was safe and sound and began enjoying himself like before.

What is humanity?

The Gomti River has been flowing in the same way for thousands of years. Floods come, wash away the nearby settlements, and the river slowly returns to flowing the old way. There's a small temple on the riverbank. The foundation seems to have been built on sand and the current of the river has eroded the sand. One section of the temple has sunk, so now the temple is crooked, but it's still standing. After a few years, it will have fallen completely. After that, for a while, the ruins will still be there. Then the place where the temple once stood will be reclaimed by the flowing river.

Today is a festival, a day of bathing. Since daybreak, there have been crowds of people at the temples and the riverbank. They're reciting mantras and taking repeated dips in the river. The water seems dirty. Marigolds and rose petals bob up and down on the waves and flow away. In a few places along the riverbank, flowers and petals, small bits of wood, cigarette butts, golden sparkles from women's garments, dead fish and other things of that sort have gotten clumped together.

The Gomti River, Lion the dog, dead fish, clouds passing in the sky, and corpses rotting on the ground—these are the things that the mercy of God overshadows.

Kallu Mehtar's teenage son was bitten by a snake. It was the rainy season and he was sleeping on the ground in the courtyard. At dawn, the snake bit him near his left elbow. He didn't feel a thing. When he got up at five in the morning, he saw the mark on his arm and felt a slight pain. He showed the mark to his mother and then, thinking that it was the bite of an insect or spider, he busied himself with sweeping. Kallu Mehtar, his wife and children were servants in the same house. They earned fifteen rupees a month, and there was a small room in the servants' quarter where all of them—Kallu Mehtar, his wife, his two daughters and his son—lived. Fifteen rupees a month, a room, and, occasionally, leftover bits of food and torn, secondhand clothes—the master from whom Kallu received these things was no less than a God to him. Kallu's son wasn't

able to work more than ten or fifteen minutes. He became dizzy and his whole body began to shiver. Just as it was turning six, he fell on the bed and began writhing in pain. He began foaming at the mouth and his eyes glazed over. The poison had spread through his veins and feet and death grabbed him in its merciless claws. His mother and father began to cry. The news that Kallu's son had been bitten by a snake spread throughout the house. Everyone suggested one remedy or another. The son of Kallu's master was very charitable and merciful. He himself went to Kallu's room, touched the son's body with his own hands and gave him medicine, but Kallu's dark room was so dirty and its stench was so overwhelming that the master's son couldn't stay for more than four or five minutes. There is, after all, a limit to charity and mercy. Returning home, he took a long bath, changed his clothes, and put a perfumed handkerchief near his face before he started feeling better. And then there was Kallu's son. At about one o'clock that unfortunate soul died. Sounds of wailing and beating could be heard from that room all night, and the whole house was filled with sadness. For the funeral, Kallu borrowed ten rupees. Sometime near eight or nine o'clock at night, the body of Kallu's son was carried away.

Hamid Sahib was in love with his cousin Sultana. Hamid Sahib had only seen Sultana Begum from afar. They hadn't exchanged more than a few words with each other, but the lightning of love has no need for words, conversation, or long acquaintances. Hamid Sahib was being consumed with emotion. He read poetry voraciously and, sometimes, when he was overcome by the intensity of his passion, he would write a ghazal, and at night he would sit quietly and sigh near the bank of the river. Only his two best friends knew the secret of Hamid's love. They praised Hamid for hiding his love—this was the way respectable people handled things.

*If you want to see her, observe her from a distance  
It is not the way of love to defame the beloved.*

Hamid rarely visited his uncle's home more than once a week, but the day before his visits his restlessness knew no bounds. The poet had put it well:

*When the promise of a tryst grows near,  
The fire of passion grows stronger.*

When his friends observed Hamid's condition, they would smile and recite this jibing poem:

*There's no trusting love—it's a fire, Ghalib,  
That won't start when you light it and won't go out when you snuff it.*

Hamid would blush, laugh, get upset, become anxious, put his hand on his heart and plead with his friends not to tease him.

Sultana Begum came from a respectable family. The words "love" and "passion"—it was inappropriate for a respectable family's daughter or daughter-in-law to have these on her lips. Probably only once, she looked her cousin Hamid in the eye while talking to him, but when she saw him standing before her nervous and anxious, she wondered whether this was the thing called love. Poor Hamid had a pure love, so if Sultana Begum was ever alone with him in a room for even a few minutes, then, except for the fact that he sighed timidly and meekly, he never announced his love to her in an "untoward" way. This pattern of lovemaking continued for some time.

When Hamid Sahib got a job, he began thinking seriously about marriage. His parents also became interested in the matter. Sultana Begum's mother was searching for a husband for her daughter too. With great difficulty, Hamid Sahib had his mother informed that he wanted to marry Sultana Begum.

A marriage proposal was sent, but Sultana Begum's mother hated Hamid Sahib's mother. As long as either could remember, the two women loathed and despised one another. Even if Hamid Mian's mother was wearing the finest clothes and jewelry, Sultana Begum's mother would invariably find some fault. If one of them had a piece of jewelry the other didn't have, then, at the next encounter, the other Begum would certainly be wearing a better piece of jewelry of the same kind. A maid fired from the first one's house would surely find employment in the second's.

When the proposal for marriage from Hamid Mian's family arrived, Sultana Begum's mother laughed and put things off. She didn't give a straight answer. She was keeping her options open and wanted to first find a husband for Sultana Begum before flatly denying Hamid's family. Hamid's mother understood these tactics quite well. Her anger knew no limits. When the household had a more than adequate, healthy, gainfully employed, well-mannered young man, what would stop them from marrying him to someone from outside Sultana Begum's family.

But Hamid's love was sincere. He told his mother that she had to keep on trying. And in this way, some time passed. It was the work of God that in the meantime Sultana Begum's mother had not found an appropriate husband for her daughter and Sultana Begum had turned nineteen. Her mother couldn't wait any longer. In the end she consented.

Hamid Mian married Sultana Begum. It has been more than two years since their wedding. The lovers' wish came true. By the grace of God, there are even two children in the household.

Lying on a broken, sagging cot, a poor woman is moaning in a dark, quiet room. The pain is so bad she can't breathe. It's nighttime and winter. The woman is about to have a child.

On a pitch black night, hiding from everyone, a poor woman sneaks away to meet her poor lover. Every time she has a chance, she goes to meet this man.

The ecstasy of love, the pain of death. This mountain whose peaks are crashing against the blue sky, why are they still standing? The waves of the ocean.

The tick-tock sound of the clock and the dripping of each drop of water can be heard. The silence and the beating of a heart, a moment of love, the sound of blood coursing through veins. The eyes hold a conversation and listen. Pig, idiot, bastard ... Insults and intense heat that seems to sear the skin and melt the bone. A zamindar and his tenant who doesn't have money to pay the rent. The son has sent his father another letter asking insistently for some money. The fees for the law exams have to be paid in four days. The father makes the tenant pay for his son's education.

The snakes are crawling in all directions—long, black, with their hoods flailed. Who should kill them, how should they be killed? The verdant, undulating fields, the cracking sound of a rifle and then a wounded crane's pain-filled caw-caw-caw. □

—Translated by Snehal Shingavi