

FAHMIDA RIAZ

Pink Pigeons—Was it They Who Won?

AN EARLY AUGUST WIND WHISPERS through the lush green trees of Alma Ata. The tiny leaves break into applause. “What are these trees called?” I ask the interpreter.

“Tuzhi,” the ravishing, delicate Tatar beauty responds gently, in a distinctly American accent.

Her name is Gulnaz. So beautiful, fragile-looking, adorable! Like a refreshing vision of paradise itself. And the words flow from her mouth in a cascade of flowers. A persistent breeze keeps blowing her short blonde hair across her light brown eyes. Again and again she pushes it back with her delicate white hand; the white stone in her gold ring flashes in the sun.

Gulnaz, why is it that our meeting here in Alma Ata has reminded me of Mulla Yusuf Ziai all of a sudden?

We are in Kazakhstan, attending a three-day literary fair. The year is 1995. The century is on its last legs.

Gulnaz, twenty-seven, married, mother of an adorable five-year-old girl—she takes out her picture from her handbag and shows it to me—has grown quite close to me.

“You speak much better English than most other interpreters. Where did you learn to speak so well?”

“At school,” she says. “I mean I went to a special school. At the end of August,” she continues, “I’ll be on my way to America. I’ve got a scholarship to study educational administration.”

Gulnaz is not a Kazakh, she tells me. More than a hundred different nationalities live in Kazakhstan: Russian, Tatar, Armenian ... Long before the Soviet Union ever came into being, for centuries people of different ethnic backgrounds just kept coming and settled down here.

“The Russians didn’t leave after Kazakhstan became independent?” I

asked.

“Some did,” she said, “but they came right back. They said they had changed. They couldn’t get used to the old Russian ways. They were too set in their Kazakh habits, customs and conventions. Besides, the other Russians didn’t care for them either.”

The wind whispers by. The leaves clap like small mischievous children.

Walking in the street as I rounded a turn, my eyes suddenly caught a pair of pink birds picking their way with great majesty along a stretch of bare dirt between the trunk of a tree and a column of grey concrete. Pink birds! Who would believe that? Where on earth has anyone ever seen pink birds? I let out a cry of joy and naïvely asked, “What are they called?”

But at that moment we didn’t have an interpreter around. The birds looked like very small pigeons. “Pink pigeons”—I christened them right away. They were walking on the raw earth with the majesty of a pair of young princes ...

Next time I see Gulnaz I’ll ask her, I tell myself—Gulnaz, who had brought to mind, irresistibly, intense memories of Mulla Yusuf Ziai.

Years ago Mullah Yusuf Ziai was my neighbor.

1977–78, I was living with my two infant children and my husband in a modest three-bedroom house in central Karachi. My husband, a Sindhi farmer, was a full-time member of a revolutionary party. Firmly resolved never to become a cog in the capitalist system, I had already quit my job at the drug company—which had many branches and which at least put food on the table twice a day for my small family—and was frantically trying somehow to get my magazine *Avaaz* off the ground. My small family’s livelihood depended on my work both as a freelance writer and as a printing contractor.

Right about then Mulla Yusuf Ziai moved into the empty house next door. And for a long time to come I enjoyed the honor of having him as a neighbor.

Those were difficult enough days already, and Mulla Yusuf’s presence next door made them even more trying. Our dingy little home in Karachi had long been the haunt of the Sindhi Peasant Revolutionary Party (SPRP). Whenever its members visited Karachi from the villages, they invariably gathered there, wrote up the party pamphlets and devised their future plans. Then the country’s Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was arrested and indicted for premeditated murder.

This sudden turn of events stood politics on its head: all political parties, small and large, were disbanded forthwith, including the SPRP. But Bhutto's arrest and predictable death sentence managed to unite the Sindhi peasantry solidly behind the political party under fire. The SPRP leadership failed to come up with a fresh and expeditious strategy to meet the new situation and had become practically immobilized due to the violent disagreements among its workers, naïve, sincere and zealous farmers who just could not go along with the logic of the party's president to exploit martial law to the party's benefit. Their hearts, like those of all the Sindhi masses, ached for the safety of the deposed Prime Minister, and no ideology was likely to change their instinctive reaction. They still gathered at my house, but in that period of repressive martial law all their efforts had come to focus unwaveringly on just one thing: how to save Bhutto.

I probably would never have met Mulla Yusuf and his family face to face but for Bibi Jan, who became the link between our two families. Bibi Jan was my children's nanny and the sole maidservant in our small household. She was a beautiful middle-aged Pathan woman whose father, long ago, had been a truck driver in Bombay, where she had grown up as a child. Her husband too had been a truck driver, in Karachi. He had died in an accident, which forced her to seek some kind of work. She wanted to be independent and bring up her two children herself.

Cheerful and fidgety, Bibi Jan had allowed her widowhood to affect her fresh, girlish gaiety only so much. After she had bathed the children and helped me fix huge pots of tea for the grim and mournful-looking party workers gathered at my place, she would breeze out of the house to socialize throughout the neighborhood. She kept close tabs on all the goings-on and related to me all the juicy stories well into the night.

It must have been during Ramzan, the month of fasting, when Bibi Jan told me:

"Beegoom Saab," (exactly—that's how she addressed me), "*Khuda'i Pak ki qasam* ... I swear to God, you really must eat at *iftar* at Mulla Yusuf Jan's one day, then you'd know. I can't tell you how many different dishes he has at his table! And here you are, a few *pakor*s, and that's all."

"What kind of dishes, for instance?" I asked.

She launched into a whole inventory of all the kinds of sweetmeats and fruits, insisting that I must accompany her to Mulla Yusuf Ziai's home for *iftar* the next day. I laughed. Then I said, "I've a better idea: we'll send a plateful of our *pakor*s to Mulla Yusuf's house as *iftari*. They'd naturally reciprocate—wouldn't they?—with a gift of their dishes, many to be sure. What do you say?"

"Good idea!" Bibi Jan nodded in approval.

Sure enough, the next day at *iftar*, Bibi Jan returned from Mullah Yusuf's house with a platter full of sweetmeats—especially different kinds of *halvas*—and fruits. I felt very embarrassed and said, "For heaven's sake Bibi Jan, I'd mentioned all that merely as a joke. You took it seriously. Why have you brought all this food along? This just isn't done!"

"Why, Beegoom Saab, why not?" Bibi Jan shot back. "I took a plate of *pakorās* for them, a whole plate, properly covered with another plate ..."

Then Bibi Jan sat down on the floor, her legs crossed, and started to wolf down the *iftari* food. "Come on, Beegoom Saab, eat!" she said, smiling at me, "Don't let it bother you. After all, it isn't as though it came out of Mulla Yusuf Ziai's own pocket." After a pause she added, "Oh, by the way, both the Mulla and his *bibi* send you their *salaams*. The *bibi* also invited you to come and visit them some time."

Weighed down by the platter of sweets, I said meekly, "Very well, Bibi Jan, we'll visit them tomorrow in the evening."

"Splendid!" she said, feeling happy, and started to tell me all about the goings-on in the neighborhood.

"You know Beegoom Saab, this Madame in the house across from us, she's having an affair with the strapping Baluchi youth who lives in the alley behind. He visits her at night. He does, I swear to God! I've seen with my own eyes ..." she said, quickly covering her eyes with one of her hands.

"Seen what?" I asked.

"Everything ... myself." She put a hand over her chest.

I burst into laughter. How could I not like her? After all, she was an enormously interesting woman.

"Everything?" I asked.

"Yes, everything!"

I laughed loudly again. "Why, Bibi Jan, why did you look? It's downright *haraam* (unlawful)!"

"No, it isn't," she shook her head, firm in her conviction. "Seeing isn't *haraam*."

"Well then, maybe it is just *makruh* (reprehensible)," I said. "In any case, your *wuzu* is as good as gone."

"No problem. I always make a fresh *wuzu* (ablution) before every prayer anyway."

She broke into ringing laughter and started to tell me another story, which went something like this:

"In Bombay we lived in a *chawli*. Women selling fish used to come by. One day I was sitting outside the door of my *kholi* when they arrived. These women would wear big billowy red and green *laihngas* and used both hands to balance the large bowl-shaped baskets they carried on their heads. 'Give me a fish!' I called to one of them. 'I feel like having some fried fish.' She said she'd sell me one for five rupees. I said I had no money. The woman mocked me: 'No money—no fish!' Saying this, Beegoom Saab, she pushed ahead, but I quickly snatched at her waist cord and pulled it clean out of her *laihnga*, which began to collapse, like a great big tent!" she reminisced, doubling over with laughter.

"My God, Bibi Jan! You did that? To a woman?" I shuddered and slapped my head in shame.

"She reached down to grab ahold of her slipping *laihnga* and—what do you know, Beegoom Saab—the basket of fish came tumbling down!"

Laughing away, Bibi Jan wiped her profusely watering eyes. I too finally started to laugh with her. "So did you get to eat fish?"

"I did, yes."

Still quaking with laughter Bibi Jan got up to make her ablutions for the night prayer.

Who can tell when Bibi Jan's forefathers had arrived in Bombay, lugging sacks of dried fruit on their backs all the way from their native Kabul. They had started out in a caravan, many of whose travelers separated and set up homes at different points along the way. Only Bibi Jan's paternal grandfather had made it to Bombay, where she was born. As a little girl she traveled with her father in a truck all the way to Surat. Perhaps that's why she had become such a gadabout. When they came over to Pakistan they decided to settle down in Karachi, but they still retained a sense of attachment to their people who had remained on the other side of the border and set up their homes there. These people frequently visited Pakistan, taking a circuitous route through the free tribal territory that lay between Pakistan and Afghanistan. If one of them found work here, he would become a Pakistani citizen in a year or two and adopt the ways of this country. "Some of them even enlist in the Pakistani army," Bibi Jan told me.

Next evening, with Bibi Jan in tow, I found myself rapping at Mulla Yusuf Ziai's door. He was sitting at the *iftari* table, with his seven- or eight-year-old daughter. His wife was frying kabobs in the kitchen. The Mulla Sahib graciously got up and received us cordially.

Fair, tall and on the heavy side, sporting a jet-black beard, Mulla

Yusuf looked like a pleasant enough individual, both cheerful and warm. Throughout he displayed great hospitality. He told us that he had been appointed *imam* of the neighborhood mosque. His speech was long-winded and convoluted, and it was delivered in highly ornate and polished Urdu. He had the enchanting style of a true raconteur. I started to speak with him in an Urdu no less embellished and eloquent.

Mulla Yusuf seemed much pleased with the change of government. He had also been appointed president of the neighborhood Zakat (Alms) Committee; he was frequently called for meetings by the City Commissioner. His new-found importance, along with the regard he was shown, had put a gloss of happiness on his face and charged his voice with a rich emotional resonance. But he seemed to think that his disposition was the result, rather, of his religious ardor. Many times over he stressed that Islamic spirit ultimately triumphs. Perhaps, I concluded, his expression was a mix of his sense of importance and the warmth of his faith. I allowed him this concession only because he treated me—purdah-less female that I was—with the utmost courtesy and deference; why, he even regarded me with approval and respect, I suppose because of my eloquent Urdu, which he tried to match with equal flourish. He seemed happy to have met me and talked with unconcealed elation. It was evident from his full, ruddy naturally cheerful face that he was absolutely certain his eloquence and subtlety would not be wasted on this woman, as they were perhaps wasted during the sermons he delivered at the mosque.

His Urdu was free of even the slightest trace of a Pakhtun accent. So I asked him where he came from originally. He responded by telling me the story of his life, which I found truly amazing. “How can I say, dear lady, where I come from. My paternal grandfather was a native of Kazakhstan.”

I was flabbergasted. I asked, “So what brought you here?”

He made a sign with his hand to indicate helplessness, then said, “Let’s just say we became a target of Russian oppression. My dear, the Revolution of 1917 destroyed our family. My grandfather was a religious scholar and *qazi*. We owned substantial property in Kazakhstan and were quite well-to-do. When the Russian bigots attacked our country, we were forced to flee with our families in the middle of the night, but thanks be to God, we managed to escape with our faith intact. After a long and hazardous trek we entered the region of Sinkiang. There, in a Muslim community, we took up religious preaching.”

“Sinkiang ... China,” I mumbled.

“Yes, respected lady. But even this respite of peace and prosperity

proved short-lived. The Communist Revolution swept over that country too. Property was confiscated. Mosques were locked up. Tyranny swept over the believers. Once again our family was made homeless. Through another long and hazardous journey we entered, via Parachinar, the region which is now a part of the God-given country of Pakistan and is known as the North West Frontier Province.”

“In that case, you have come from Parachinar,” I said softly.

His story was beginning to depress me. The Communist Revolution had only recently appeared in Afghanistan. The withered faces of our companions had brightened up after an interminably long time. We supported the Afghan communists with the depth of our being. Only days ago I had editorialized in my magazine: “In the rocky lands of Central Asia imperialist riders take a humiliating fall ...”, and so on.

“No,” he quickly said, “this humble creature has been living in Karachi for the past twenty-five years.”

With a heavy heart I said good-bye to him, glancing meanwhile at his beautiful but plump wife, and his seven-year-old daughter whom he had already put into heavy purdah.

Some of Mulla Yusuf Ziai’s story, which sounded more like fiction, I believed, and some I did not. A glance at his face, though, gave the impression that a core of truth did lie hidden behind some fold of that beefy face, whose protruding cheekbones and intensely black and slanting eyes had been practically covered over by flab. But such faces were a common enough sight in Frontier Province and Baluchistan. Was he truly an ethnic Kazakh? I wondered. I recall that at the time both Kazakhstan and Sinkiang seemed like mythical landscapes in a fairyland. As if they existed nowhere—or if at all, then in some fertile region of the human imagination.

What was evident, however, was his unqualified hatred for the communists and his attachment to the then martial law-regime in the country. The proximity of a steadfast opponent right next door, where the thinnest cement wall was all that ensured the privacy of our two homes, made me feel pretty vulnerable. As I have said, it was a difficult time. Martial law was incredibly harsh. State prisons were bursting with political prisoners, some of whom had been publicly lashed for a crime no more serious than shouting “Long live Bhutto!” Given the conditions, our political strategizing and pamphlet preparation had to remain, of necessity, a top-secret activity.

“He *is* a government spy, take my word for it. He’s been planted in that house by the government expressly to spy on us,” my husband said,

with the peculiar megalomania of workers in a political party who hold the secret ambition of someday assuming its leadership.

In spite of my persistent worry I managed to laugh some. As I more or less lived in a world of my imagination, I thank God I had been spared that megalomania—well, to some degree at least. Besides, who had the time to worry about leadership, when half the mind's resources were daily squandered over how to make ends meet?

I do not recall if I visited Mulla Yusuf's home ever again, although *iftari* plates and different kinds of sweet dishes were frequently exchanged between our two houses through the good offices of Bibi Jan, whom Mulla Sahib had managed to get a sizable sum from the Zakat Fund.

Individual days and nights, let alone months and years, had come to assume unprecedented significance. We were completely overwhelmed by our own preoccupations and thoughts. Opposition to the Saur Revolution was gaining strength in Afghanistan, followed by overt support for the resistance by the Government of Pakistan. Subsequently, Russian troops entered Afghanistan. One day I read a horrific report in the *Guardian* according to which Afghan mujahideen had grabbed some Russian troops somewhere, murdered them, then skinned them and hung their skins in a butcher shop.

The report made my hair stand on end. I had only one thought in my mind: these Russian youths had arrived in Afghanistan to protect the Red Revolution. My heart was overcome by emotion and I started to write a poem:

You hang in the butcher's shop
the virgin body of a red youth
we will buy that body ...

For some reason I couldn't finish the poem, as more pressing matters claimed my attention. Afterwards, I was able to add only two more lines:

It exudes the scent of brotherhood
we will buy the clothes ...

The second line was clearly faulty. The word that I needed to string the two lines into an incontrovertible unity of logic and sense was rebelling against the meter.

But there was another, non-technical reason as well. At a party or two which I had the chance to attend at the Soviet Embassy, the flat, expres-

sionless faces of the Embassy personnel, their haughty manners, their stiff-necked and arrogant attitude had not sat well with my naturally rebellious, spontaneous and carefree disposition. I had not discerned the “scent of brotherhood” wafting from them at all, even though I had somehow comforted myself with the thought that all Soviets were not likely to be this bad, and told myself I really shouldn’t judge a whole nation by a few of its people. They were not really true Soviet people, but only an assemblage of cogs in a bureaucracy, and let’s face it, one bureaucracy is no different from any other. Gradually, its members are threatening to become a breed unto themselves the world over. I must confess though, my heart yearned to behold the Russians who had ushered in the Revolution, and even more—the addict of literature that lay hidden within me begged—the gamut of Russians who figured in the works of Dostoevski, Tolstoy, and Gogol. Where were they? Certainly not in the Soviet Embassy.

Though I balmed my heart with reason, I probably still carried a trace of resistance to the Soviets in some corner of my subconscious; hence, I never could bring myself to finish the poem.

Mulla Yusuf Ziai’s *imam*-ship in the neighborhood mosque did not last long. In that tense and tumultuous time, I heard one day that a veritable riot had broken out within the mosque compound and that a group of worshippers had beaten up Mulla Yusuf. He was removed from his post as the mosque’s *imam*. The problem was that Mulla Sahib subscribed to the religious ideas and thinking of the Deobandis, which had been reinforced in him further by the stiff, fundamentalist Wahhabi attitude of the the government at the time. He quite forgot that in spite of its Bhutto-bashing, Karachi was after all a city in which Berelvi beliefs prevailed; it was unlikely that Karachiites would put up with Mulla Yusuf’s aggressively puritanical preaching for too long.

The truth is, the news saddened me much. Why did I never consider Mulla Yusuf as a true enemy? Only God knows. He treated me with courtesy and deference. And that’s as far as our relationship went. He firmly believed that preaching, receiving gifts from the worshippers, becoming president of the Zakat Committee and gradually amassing property were all perfectly natural things, and he skipped merrily along the path he had chosen for himself. He had his own set of Islamic beliefs, to which he adhered unwaveringly.

Bibi Jan, though, secretly laughed. “Beegoom Saab,” she would say, “the Mulla—he’d gathered for himself a lot of stuff.” At about this time, she’d had a falling out with Mulla Yusuf Ziai. The matter, if I remember

correctly, probably had something to do with *zakat*.

Life was speeding by. Bibi Jan's frequent laughter gave our otherwise somber house a semblance of life. Once though, I came to experience her violent anger first-hand.

Bibi Jan was always on the move. She would be done with the household chores in no time at all, throw her white shuttlecock-looking *burqa* over her head—which sort of flapped and trailed behind her and never got in the way of her buoyant laughter—and set off for far-flung Pakhtun neighborhoods, returning late at night riding in some truck or another. One day she dragged my littlest boy along. When she still hadn't returned at sundown, I was worried sick. Finally she arrived, the boy comfortably asleep on her shoulder. I let her have it, beside myself with anger. I wasn't feeling well that day and had been running a fever since the morning. Perhaps I had called her *avarah-gard* (wanderer), and Bibi Jan took it to mean *avarah* (profligate). Instantly her face turned a sizzling red. Without uttering a word she left the room and started to do the dishes, and I repaired to the bedroom and lay down on the bed.

Shortly thereafter the door opened and in walked Bibi Jan. She closed the door behind her and fastened the latch. Then, slapping her hands onto her waist, she stood herself directly across from me.

"Beegoom Saab!" she challenged me in a sharp thin voice, "you called me a bad name. Now get up, and if you have the guts, face me."

Sprawled out on my bed I just gawked at the willowy Afghan woman decked out in her jingling silver jewelry, who stood ready to come to blows with me. I don't know whether I was more frightened or amused by all this. For a moment, though, the thought of fighting with her went through me like an electric current. She wasn't a big woman, nor had I any reason to underrate my own physical strength. But then her face, poised on the verge of tears, sent a surge of tenderness through me. Hiding my laugh I said, "Look Bibi Jan, I'm not feeling well today. Here," I forced her hand on my wrist, "see, I'm running a temperature."

Her expression changed. For a moment or two she stood there confused, unable to decide. Then she unlatched the door and walked out.

The next day I hugged her, and she was easily reconciled, though not without registering her unhappiness one final time. "But Beegoom Saab, you called me a bad name."

I explained to her gently that the phrase *avarah-gard* really didn't amount to a rebuke. It meant somebody who liked to be forever on the go.

"Welllll ..." she smiled, finally at ease, and started to mix a portion of henna and some hair dye. White had begun to show in her hair, which she covered up with regular applications of dye.

My hair too had begun to show grey, but I cared little about it. She, however, frequently offered, "Beegoom Saab! Shall I dye your hair too?"

"No," I would stop her with a shake of my head, feeling wistful, "leave it as it is. I like it to be natural."

"Hmmm!" She would shake her head like someone who knows a secret, and knows how to keep it. After all, she lived with us. How could she not know the dissatisfaction of my conjugal life? "Your husband," she would say furtively, "he doesn't take care of you?" I usually wouldn't answer, or on occasion merely say "yes" and feel a momentary twinge of grief.

"You're an angel, Beegoom Saab," Bibi Jan would insist. I felt embarrassed, and mightily bored, not only because I didn't believe in angels, but also because even in the farthest corner of my mind I could not equate history's most protracted sexual fantasy—which was my fate—with anything angelic at all.

Well then, that's how it was. A profusion of contending truths that jostled along a single continuum. Revolutionary fervor and personal unfulfillment—neither of which had managed to subdue the other, both living in perfect symbiosis under a single roof, as if incapable of negating or canceling the other out.

Bibi Jan had given up working for us, though she still recounted for my benefit the scandals of the entire neighborhood, what the wives and the young men were up to. And then she would get up, make her ablutions and stand to perform the prayer.

One afternoon I left the office early. As I was absentmindedly climbing up the dark twisting stairway of my house I bumped into Bibi Jan, who was locked in an embrace with one of the SPRP members. They were kissing passionately. Immediately I turned around and went back down. For a moment or two I stood like a total idiot outside my door, until a surge of unexpected pride and independence washed over me. I climbed back up, entered the house and went straight into my room. One night Bibi Jan had wanted to test her strength against me. This afternoon, though, in an invisible battle that had been raging all along in our unconscious, Bibi Jan had taken the fall, and was lying face down.

Throughout we had each been a true and supporting companion to the other, and had become very close. And yet, all this time, could we

have been a pair of antagonists locked in a relentless test of strength? The reality of our silent battle dawned on me only that afternoon, in the wake of that unmistakable feeling of triumph. In the same instant I also realized how unyielding my heart had been in resisting her sympathy—pity really. Had Bibi Jan, too, come to realize all this? For after the episode she quietly picked up her things and left my house, only to pervade my memory and my thoughts for a long time to come.

Shortly afterwards, following a series of political maneuverings and government-manufactured lawsuits, my small family was thrown headlong into exile, which lasted some seven years.

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After this long excursus in the realm of memory, let's return to the spacious Alma Ata plaza presided over by the looming statue of a poet. We're waiting for the 150th-anniversary celebrations of this Kazakh poet to get underway. Present are several presidents of Central Asian republics: Turkmenistan, Kirgizia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Tataristan—all newly independent, Muslim, Russified. They are planting kiss after noisy kiss on each other's cheeks.

The Tatar beauty is resplendent like a ray of the golden Alma Ata sun.

And it is 1995. The century well on its way out. And the wind whispering through the sparse, green trees.

The Soviet Union is no more; gone too is the communist system. But before its demise, that system did at least leave its parting gifts to this land of the Kazakhs: skyscrapers, wide avenues and a hundred-percent literacy rate. Some bitter memories too. The Kazakh writer said in his seminar address (which the attendees heard in instant translation in fifteen different languages via their headsets, thanks to the high-tech paraphernalia left behind by the Soviet system): "The communist Russian rulers conducted nuclear tests in the lush green plains of Kazakhstan. As a result, much of our land and water suffers from atomic pollution."

Two lasting monuments of the hate-filled battle between the two Cold War superpowers: Kazakhstan's polluted water, and several thousand barrels of plutonium buried in the American state of Nevada, which are proving quite a chore to dispose of.

The rampant inflation and crime rate in Kazakhstan.

A profusion of contending truths, jostling along a single continuum, living in perfect symbiosis, incapable of canceling each other out.

No longer did Kazakhstan appear such a mythical land of fairies, but

rather a newly independent state. Muslim? Yes, Muslim too. (Will the Tahrik-e Khatm-e Nubuwwat* be launched here too? Will the Sipah-e Sahaba* be unleashed in this country too? Yes ... they are coming by the planeload ...)

A country ... at a new crossroads of history.

I saw Russians who had been living here for generations. Kazakh citizens, but Russian all the same. Their faces weren't flat. Blue-eyed and blond: characters in the novelistic space of Dostoevski, Tolstoy, and Gogol. It is late at night. A skinny young man is playing the violin in the hotel restaurant. He starts a familiar tune especially for the delegates seated around our table. The tune reverberates in the restaurant, and the words sink straight into our heads:

Mera juta hai japani, yeh patloon inglistani
Sar pe lal topi rusi, phir bhi dil hai hindustani

The Kazakh patrons begin to sway with the tune; we're the only ones who don't. We are angered by the egregious manipulation of words, though Raj Kapur is marching right along in our imagination.

"Say, '*pakistani*,' not '*hindustani*,' dummy ..." we mumble, grinding our teeth.

"Why are so many Russians still here?" So they keep asking.

Will they be kicked out of the country? The violin-playing youth? The traffic cop in the street? The engineer who works for the Ministry of Transport?

Well then—who won? I wondered. Was I happy to see the Kazakhs free? Yes, I was. And that's the truth. The Soviet Union was communist. It was also imperialist. Neither truth could negate the other.

Alma Ata is filled with Americans. And Turks, who want to draw this half-Mongol, half-Turk nation to themselves. The Americans are preoccupied with how to keep these newly independent states from becoming Islamic extremists while at the same time not letting them backslide into the Russian sphere of influence. The Islamists, on the other hand, want to grab hold of the Kazakh's enviable atomic expertise and make them members of a modern Islamic nuclear club, want to see them in the guise of mujahideen, but at the same time are apprehensive that the Kazakh

* Two fundamentalist militant Muslim organizations in Pakistan.

leadership not be hijacked by these Russified shepherds. The city is teeming with spies, diligently sniffing and snooping around.

Gulnaz, a distant relative of whose—Bibi Jan—had tried to test her hand against me one night and whom I love dearly (*“Beegoom Saab! Khuda’i Pak ki qasam ...”*)—Gulnaz, who recites Pushkin poems for me, has studied literature at the university. “Pushkin had Arab blood in him,” she says. “Racially, he wasn’t pure Russian, and in a way, he remade the Russian language.”

Then she smiles and says, “You only need to scratch a Russian, any Russian, and a Muslim or Tatar will pop out. They colonized us for a very long time. Look what it’s done to them. It’s altered their very nature, which now resembles ours.”

She laughs, and it sweeps up Gulsara, too, our new Kazakh interpreter.

“But now? Which way do the Kazakhs want to go now?” I ask both of them.

“I don’t know!” Gulsara responds. “If public opinion is any indication, we want to become like Taiwan or Singapore.”

I cannot help but burst into a gigantic laugh. For heaven’s sake! How many countries will become another Taiwan, another Singapore! Shouldn’t we perhaps go there first and see what the countries we want to emulate are like?

Although our Kazakh interpreter Gulsara did her graduate work in physics, she has learned English and is working as an interpreter now. She is wearing blue eye-shadow and is contemplating opening a boutique.

The wind is whispering through the leaves.

And yesterday I saw a pair of pink pigeons pecking in the dirt.

But I don’t tell Gulsara this.

My exile did finally end and I did get to see Mulla Yusuf Ziai’s wife and daughter. But where?

In short, more white had begun to show in my hair; I was getting older. With passing years, the desire to remain natural first weakened and then completely died. I had begun to dye my hair, for which I didn’t even need to admit any cruelly suppressed desire or secret, inarticulate longing.

A few years after returning from exile, I recall visiting a beauty parlor to have my hair dyed. Seeing Mulla Yusuf’s wife there—a wife he had kept behind seven impenetrable veils—I was practically swept off my feet. A lovely young woman was applying a beauty mask to her face.

We were both so shocked seeing each other there that we couldn’t

even manage proper embarrassment at the exposure of the shameless secret of our desire to cling so fastidiously to our fading youth—her herbal mask, my dyed black hair. For a long while we exchanged pleasantries and inquired about each other. She told me that Mulla Yusuf Ziai had become terribly disillusioned by the constant upheavals in the country and had given up his *imam*-ship and began to trade in animal skins instead.

“Don’t you have a daughter, if I recall correctly?”

“Here she is,” she told me, looking at the handsome beautician. “She just finished a course as a beautician and needed some practical training. I thought I’d let her work on me.”

Well Gulnaz and Gulsara, I then took a good look at your cousin. Breathtakingly beautiful, tall and willowy and slim, wearing a delicate shade of lipstick, just as you are. Her hair was cut short, constantly blown over her eyes by the breeze from the parlor’s ceiling fan. The female seclusion behind purdah, that style of life which Mulla Yusuf Ziai’s father and grandfather had held dearer than life—indeed, in order to preserve it they had perilously trekked through the ice-clad mountains and frozen passes of Kazakhstan and Sinkiang on horseback until they arrived here—this had been blown away by the winds of Karachi in a mere decade.

Where did that way of life go?

It’s gone where the dream of Communism itself has gone—rustling in the winds, somewhere far, far away ...

Who did win then? I asked myself.

The British journal *The Economist* commented following the demise of The Soviet Union: “No reason to celebrate. After all, in reality nobody won.”

But I thought: the pink pigeons won—pigeons that were never part of any contest.

*

P.S.:

And, oh yes, I also met Bibi Jan after returning from exile. She is now a well-regarded maidservant in a Memon household—something like a chief of staff. She was wearing an embroidered silk suit and hugged me the instant she saw me. We kept laughing out of sheer joy, hugging all the while. Bibi Jan did not remarry. She looked after her two children by herself. One of them, she told me happily, had enlisted in the army. □

—Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon