

He was born fair, like most Kashmiris are. He was born in downtown Srinagar near a shrine in which, some believed, was buried Jesus Christ. If he was indeed buried there, his grave was a relatively unostentatious affair and the shrine over it was not ostentatious either. As a child, the coming of carfuls of white people—*angrez*, the generic term, no matter what their nationality—had been an event to look forward to. They were difficult to tell from other tourists; they were the fringe-thinkers, of the Von Daniken and Berlitz schools of thought, coming to take a look at the place (imagine the world-shaking implications!) where our Lord Jesus might be buried.

For him, it was a vague source of excitement, this coming and going of foreigners and the discussions the elders held about what the foreigners were trying to establish. He had taken the position that Jesus was indeed buried at Rozabal—the same position that his father held on the matter.

“The Quran clearly says that Jesus went to Paradise, and the Paradise could well be Kashmir,” he would tell his friends—those who were hostile to his belief—repeating what he had heard from his father.

“It is blasphemous to say so,” a friend would say, repeating what his father was fond of saying.

He was about nine then and the playgrounds were the cobbled lanes and the nearby park. His was a childhood of middle-class conditioning, the father a clerk in some government department and the mother a *burqa*-clad woman when outside the house and a diligent slogger when inside it. His childhood consisted of dreaming of the big cities and what life in them was like.

Amrika was a favourite topic of discussion between him and his friends, with each pre-teen in the peer group telling his own stories about

SHORT STORY

The Portrait of a Kashmiri

○ Anwar Owais

the glorious land and the things of wonder there. Those days, during his childhood, television had been a rarity in Kashmir and most of the boys he knew had never seen one.

“In *Amrika*, there is a television in every house,” said a boy once, his face dead serious and awe written all over it.

When Showkat felt that a certain boy was becoming too powerful in the group, he would cut him to size with a display of his own superior wisdom and higher agenda.

“*Amrika*,” he said in this case, “is persecuting Muslims all over the world. Look at what they are doing in Palestine.”

A silence fell over the group and the one Hindu boy, who was to later

flee Kashmir with his family, nodded his head in solidarity with the others. The boy who had offered the information about the number of televisions in *Amrika* had to slink back in the face of better strategy.

Thus was his childhood spent. Religion, of course, was an integral part of it. He liked the Urs time best. There was another shrine nearby—no rumours about this one—and the activities around it dominated their lives—both at the conscious and subconscious levels. He waited for the 11 days of festivities that shifted a bit each year because the Muslim calendar is not a solar one, and over the years during which he grew from a boy to man, the time for the Urs celebrations had changed from June to January.



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He felt happy as a lark in the milling crowds that thronged the shrine during those 11 days and in his 12th year, picked up the courage to tease the girls. Once he had the audacity to go up to a girl, who carried a yellow sequined purse dangling from her shoulder, and wished her “*Urs Mubarak*”. He had confided in an older friend about this brave deed, who in turn had scared him by saying that the girls were looking for him and would turn him over to the police. He had felt terrified and too scared to roam the people-filled street, but also too proud to lose face



by escaping from his imagined female tormentor and returning to the safe ensconcement of home. By the next day of the Urs celebrations, however, he had forgotten all about the incident. Well, almost. He didn't tease any more girls for the rest of the Urs celebrations that year.

Showkat was fair, like I said. And like most Kashmiris, handsome. However, in Srinagar, he was one among many and there was no one to tell him that he looked good. And his developing libido found no release either. He graduated from teasing girls to harassing them, but the sexual tensions remained firmly unresolved until he found paid release in far-away Bangalore. In Srinagar, religious conditioning produced a strange kind of misogyny in him; women were fascinating beings, sexuality oozed from them; their faces super-smooth and the shape of their breasts behind their dupattas tantalising. He thought their gait was maddening; small-stepped and dainty. But religion clearly said that carnal feelings were evil. “True

love” was that which involved no sexual desire for the girl.

He was in “true love” once and had asked a friend who was good at English to draft a love-letter for him. The closest he had got to praising her sexuality—and they had been very careful here—had been calling her eyes and hair beautiful. Shabnam, that was the girl's name, lived in the same downtown locality as him and he had passed on the letter to her through his niece. He had put it in a magazine which he hadn't read—he hardly read anything—and had asked his niece to give the magazine to the girl.

He was sure she would guess the magazine carried a message, because they had exchanged greetings a few times and he had hinted at his feelings for her. She had not been offended and he had felt confident enough to give her a love-letter.

She didn't reply. And her response through her behaviour confused him. The romance, or whatever there was of it, remained

confined to their meetings on the road and exchanging *salaams*; she seemed to turn her eyes away from him after the letter episode and he wasn't sure what to make of it. The libido was young, but the repression ancient. Age won.

Showkat went to school, then to college, cramming what he was expected to cram.

He studied English, Urdu and the sciences at school. He did not study Kashmiri, because Kashmiri is not taught in schools. When I say he “studied” science, I mean he learnt to reproduce in

the examination what he had memorised from the text-books. He virtually perfected the art of “cheating from memory” and got distinction level marks in all the Board exams he sat for. He did not study “medical subjects” (the choice would have allowed him to try and become a doctor) because he couldn't draw and the required anatomical drawings would have been a problem. So he sat for the Regional Engineering College entrance examination, one among many seeking an uncreative, dead degree to get ahead in the small town rat-race, and failed.

After he failed the R.E.C. entrance exam, he had two choices; to try again the next year and get into the only engineering college in Kashmir, or, to pay the capitation fee and get into a private engineering college in some other Indian city like Bangalore.

His father decided that at 20 he was too old to wait another year or take the risk of failing the entrance exam yet again. No, he would withdraw the money from his

savings and pay the fee that was required. When Showkat protested, his father assumed the patriarchal role and told him that his elders knew what was good for him.

So he came to Bangalore; with adolescent ideas about conquering the city and cocking snooks at the city-slickers. His mind was as much on education — he knew that he had to get a degree in order to get a job — as it was on the freedom he would find. His father travelled with him and they went straight to the Muslim-run Al Islamic College. It was on the outskirts of Bangalore and had a huge tract of land in front. Showkat, in his naivety, was impressed and thought this indicated that the campus was huge. He was to find out later that the land belonged to a landlord of the nearby village; he found this out when the landlord built a factory there and the sheds that passed for the college got obscured by it. But then, he had got impressed by the quiet ambience of the college and the trees planted here and there on the land in front of the college. His father had not even bothered to see any other college, not realising that a Muslim-run and low capitation fee college meant a bad college. And Showkat, with no familiarity of the world outside Kashmir, hadn't known better either. He even looked forward to some high-class teaching, perhaps a better insight

into various subjects from better teachers.

He was awarded the branch of civil engineering, got accommodation in the hostel—he had to share the room with two other students—and his father left. Before leaving, however, he gave some parting advice.

“I have invested Rs 30,000, as your capitation fee plus I have to spend what it will cost you to stay here, for your education. Make sure that you don't make it go waste. Stay away from water (he didn't say “alcohol”, because even using the word was taboo for him) and don't do immoral things. What you do here will be known in Kashmir and you know that it will affect both you and your sister. I have put a stone on my heart by allowing you to come here. Now it is upto you to make your career.”

But it wasn't upto him. It was largely upto the college and the

college let him down. And he did not keep away from “water” and immoral things either.

His encounter with immoral things came first, when he left the hostel and shifted to a small flat in a nearby area. He shared it with three other Kashmiris. One evening, when he was alone in the flat, there was a knock on the door and he opened it. He was rather surprised to see that it was a prostitute who often sold sexual favours to his flatmates. He had never tried her himself. But here she was, clad in a cheap, imitation-silk saree and plastic slippers, a pouting smile on her lips. The first thing that occurred to him when he saw her was that she had the selling penchant of announcing her religious affiliations. Showkat had been disgusted by this and had spent the entire night thinking about “true love”. Love sans sexuality.

But that evening had been his first experience of sexual involvement. He let her in, aroused by the fact that he was alone in a flat with a young woman who needed no persuasion to have sex with him. The poor girl was no virgin, but he was. He felt a bit strange, not sure how to start, even as the woman told him the rates of her orifices; Rs 20 for her vagina, Rs 30 for her mouth and Rs 40 for her rectum. By the time she had removed her clothes and was unbuttoning his



shirt, chirpily carrying on a monologue in Kannada, he had overcome his inhibitions and asked her for a fellatio by first pointing to his erect member and then to her mouth. She gave him the pouting smile and asked him to lie down. He came rather quickly in her mouth and for several weeks wondered if he had lost his virginity. He gave her Rs 25. A few weeks later he no longer had to wonder if he had lost his virginity and the monthly “sharing” of a Rs 500-a-night-prostitute with another man became a practice with him. He saved money for it.

The “water” came a trifle later, when he was more at ease with his new-found freedom. He started by drinking beer with his friends. The friends were non-Kashmiri. Kashmiris stayed away from alcohol even as they whored; the taboo of alcohol proved stronger than the questionable morality of buying sex from women who sold their religious identities and carried price-tags on their orifices. Showkat, however, thought that alcohol was a far lesser evil and soon took to whisky and rum. Cheap whisky and cheap rum.

The “water” and the immoral acts began to tell on his parents’ budget and they asked him more than once what he was doing with the money.

But there was the degree. He had come for the degree. He found out in his very first year that the college lacked teaching staff, laboratory equipment and a separate bathroom for girls. It became clear to him that he would have to get his degree the way the tradition of the college had it: by cheating.

Acutally, it was a farcical game the teachers and students played during



the exams. The teachers, whose job it was to supervise during the exams (which the university conducted) knew that the students cheated, that they brought ‘chits’ with them and that almost all of them copied from their neighbours. They pretended to supervise, only ensuring that a free-for-all melee did not result in any of the examination centres. Only on rare occasions did they fail and there were scenes of examinees walking freely from desk to desk, copying without fear or qualms. Such scenes were few, but copying was the norm. The university knew about it, but lacked both the resources and the will to curb it. They knew the college wasn’t producing real engineers or scientists, but merely boys (and a few girls) whom a piece of paper declared Bachelors of Engineering. There were, of course, some outstanding students who scored high marks in the exams. All of them wished they were studying in some other college.

There were a few girls in Showkat’s batch, and he had come a long way from “true love”. He discussed about them and the possible things that could be done to them with other boys, but his expression of the libido remained restricted to paid encounters. Language alone would have been an unsurmountable problem for him in trying to get friendly with the girls. He never got beyond having fantasies about them. And completed his degree a year later than all of them.

But he got his degree. At the age of twenty-five, he was a Bachelor of Engineering (Civil) and was sat to start life as an adult.

When he was in college, a fellow Kashmiri had become the target of cruel teasing for which he was responsible. In a half-joking manner, the boy had once boasted to his fellow students that he would find a high-paying job when he completed his degree. He would have, he told them, free accommodation, a car and Rs 1 lakh as salary. Perhaps he was telling them that he had the initiative, but he was taken for a fool and asked for the rest of his years in Al Islamic College about his flat and car. None of the students of the college expected to become big-time executives.

So Showkat started small. He joined as an overseer for a small company in Bangalore; they paid him Rs.2,000 per month. His life style changed little from his student days, but he was gaining experience. Experience that would fetch him a similar job in a Gulf country, at a similar level of pay there. The conversion into rupees would do the trick. He, Showkat, of downtown Srinagar, would earn more than Rs 50,000 a month.

And earn he did. He worked in the Bangalore company for a year and a half, waiting for his chance to make it to a company that would pay him in dinars or riyals, pretending to himself that he was a skilled engineer, when he was little more than a lower-level manager whose task was to ensure that a particular wall or a particular roof was built according to the specifications and on time. Finding the right job proved quite easy. All he had to do was contact a job agent in Mumbai through a letter and he was asked to appear in an interview before a delegation of company executives. It was an American company, run mainly by Asians in Kuwait. During the interview, they hardly asked him about his subject. They mainly negotiated the salary. He paid the agent his salary for one month—it came to Rs 55,000.

And to Kuwait he went. This time he had no stars in his eyes. He had figured out the way the world worked and was ready to grovel before the system. His only regret, however, was his background, which would prevent him from rising too high in the hierarchy. He knew what to expect in Kuwait: the prejudice, the *Hindifirang* attitude of his bosses, and overseeing in overbearing heat at sites. He would avoid the last as much as possible. He would avoid it by showering gifts on his bosses and trying to get into a desk position. He would have sex with prostitutes on weekends—he found the Palestinians offering optimum value in terms of wages offered and price demanded.

When he had been in Kuwait for a year, a middleman brought a *rishita* from a respectable family from uptown Srinagar. Showkat was in Kuwait when the family said “yes”. He was sent a

photograph of the girl and the girl’s family was given a photograph of his.

He liked the picture and thought the family was a good one. The girl’s family thought likewise and they liked the boy’s salary; the girl was a doctor herself and could find a job in Kuwait.

He returned to Srinagar for the *nikaah* ceremony. He wore an *achkan* and a *churidar* and his relatives danced and sang traditional songs. The *nikaah* was done without the bride and the bridegroom being present at the same place. He had met her once before the *nikaah* ceremony. The cologne he had applied to his face for the date was not as expensive as the cologne he used for the ceremony.

The Qazi asked him if he agreed to marry the girl.

Showkat responded: “I accept, I accept, I accept.” □

Women Bhakt Poets



*“No one can stop you - Mira set out in ecstasy.
Modesty, shame, family honour - all these I threw off my head.
Flinging away praise and blame, I took the narrow path of knowledge.
Tall the towers, red the windows - a formless bed is spread,
Auspicious the five coloured necklace, made of flowers and buds,
Beautiful armlets and bracelets, vermilion in my hair parting,
The tray of remembrance in my hand - a beauty more true.
Mira sleeps on the bed of happiness - auspicious the hour today.
Rana, you go to your house - you and I cannot pull together.
No one can stop you - Mira set out in ecstasy.”*

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