

Jalebi

A short story

by Manahil Naik

Chacha Aslam is a racist bastard.

We don't have many books in Shahpur's local library but it has five copies of "To Kill A Mockingbird".

I borrowed the one that had a note on the front page stating it once belonged to Shahpur's unexposed writer who uses a pen name "Aman", in 1972.

Shahpur library has twenty one novels and eleven poetry books written by Aman.

He's probably the best writer in the world.

I searched the Web for a secret Shahpur writer Aman and his books but apparently Google does not know local secrets.

I asked Ahmed, the elderly librarian, who Aman was and he began quoting Quranic verses on never drawing curtains from other people's secrets. If you hold Aman's copy of "To Kill A Mockingbird" close to you nostrils, you can physically smell the nostalgia encrusted on the pages as dust.

It makes me like the book even more and I'm thinking of convincing Ahmed to sell it to me because a small library doesn't need five copies of the same book.

Besides, Shahpur is a tiny place and no one ever reads anymore but some enthusiastically mysterious person writes secretly for Allah knows what audience.

Anyway, I'm thinking of punching Chacha Aslam till the pakora serving as a nose on his face breaks.

I've recently just learnt how sucky and sick racists are and he can't shut up with his offensive (got to admit unfortunately hilarious) Pathan jokes.

Abba and the other neighbours meet every Sunday for Amma's chai and jalebi.

Initially, the meeting was called "panchayat" which served the purpose of discussing neighbourhood issues and solving them.

Later, it just became an excuse for jalebi and chai, another one of Chacha Aslam's 'genius' ideas.

"Okay now hear this brothers, a fresh one" Chacha Aslam says, clapping his hands together, so everyone can laugh at his crap jokes.

He is an ordinary kisaan, a farmer, who grows potatoes on a land that belongs to Chaudhary Rasheed, the rich man of the town.

Maybe, that's why he does it.

Memorizing jokes every weekend for the sake of applause from other men. Maybe, it makes him feel better about himself.

"So there was a Pathan who-"

Blahblahblah

I wish Finch was here.

"DEENA TAKE THE JALEBIS TO YOUR UNCLES" Amma calls from inside and I rush indoors.

I hate Sundays and sadly, it isn't even because of school the next day, but the extra dishes I get to wash for no reason.

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The next day, after school, I convince Bhai to stop the Vespa by the library.

I tell Ahmed the book was "influential" and that I want to buy it but it only pisses him off because "You should know the difference between a bookstore and a library."

I don't insist or argue. He's an old man with a failed kidney.

"One more to go, Ya Allah! One more" he says every time Shahpur boils in the heat of summer days.

I prowl around the library when Ahmed calls out to me, "There's your hero's new book."

"You should've said before!" I squeal in delight.

My heart leaps in bliss and the hot summer day blooms into pleasant spring.

That's how good a writer Aman is. I turn to thank Ahmed but he is already immersed in reciting his gold-covered Quran.

I rush outside and Bhai quickly flicks his cigarette away, spraying his neck with cheap rose water and popping a mint gum in his mouth.

Abba would skin him alive if he smells cigarette on him. It's a relief he smokes and Abba is anger in the shape of a wrinkly, old man else I'd never be able to blackmail him into taking me to the library.

"Aman wrote a new book Bhai" I tell him and he flicks his hand, dismissing my excitement.

Amma reads all his books with me. Maybe, it is one of the many reasons why I always put her before Abba.

The world deserves to know about him. But sometimes I feel, it's only me and Amma reading his books.

I don't know if it's a sin to say this but Allah forbid, he writes like he's an Earth God, like he knows it all.

What love and pain and longing feels like.

He writes things so relatable like it's not Allah but he who weaves the lobes of human brains together, he who stews the grey and white matters.

Every time, we pass by an elderly man, chewing tobacco or sugar canes, spitting paan at street corners, I wonder if it's Aman.

He is so magnificent and unrealistically close and I wonder if I might have passed by him in the bazaar and the thought, merely, agitates my soul.

He never hints who he is in his books. All of his stories, poetries, are based in Shahpur and his pen name is all I know about him.

Also, the fact that he owned a copy of "To Kill A Mockingbird" in 1972 that he donated to the library.

I don't know who he is but the best part is, he could be anyone.

As soon as we reach home, I rush for the bathroom, bolt the door and sit on the toilet to read in peace so no one could ask me to brew tea or iron their kurtas even though, by now, every one knows where to find me when Aman writes a book.

'Jalebi', I smile to myself.
He's always so clever with the titles.

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Sunday morning, panchayat doesn't happen.
Every neighbour who liked or disliked Chacha Aslam gathers in his pitiful, one room cottage.

Bhai, I and Amma, dressed in white are present too.

Amma's eyes are glossy and she blinks intensely like it's taking everything she has to conceal the tears.

I know it. She won't cry. She's a woman of stone, by now. A woman with no soul.

She won't cry if she tells herself not to.
Just like the day she told her soul to go away, and it did.

I recall what Aman had written in his book:

"Her Abba said no because I was a Shi'a Muslim. He rejected me for belonging to a class of Muslims that doesn't even exist in the first place.

*The last time we sneaked into the woods was the last time I truly felt.
She wore a red kameez and a large gold chador that hid the curves of her waistline, that he would touch tomorrow and I found myself silently praying 'Let his hand be gentle Ya Allah, like she would break into a million beautiful pieces of gold if he touched too rough.'
She made jalebi for me, to mark the day of our silent, secret loss of souls.
We sat by the Shahpur river and she said, 'We can hold hands and let the river take over what is left of our lives.'
She wiped her eyes with her henna palms, 'I promise I wouldn't even struggle to breathe. We can die with only each other by our sides, with aman, with peace.'
I didn't look at her. I couldn't.
Instead, I told her the jalebi was crispier than it had ever been.
Fifty years later, I wished I had done things differently.
No, not walking into the river with her and let her die. She was too beautiful for that. I should have felt the hurt in her tears with my fingertips, I should have touched her quivering lips, I should have kissed her forehead, tucked her raven hair behind her ear and said goodbye. But that is what life is all about. 'I should have.'
All I did was, sit back, listen to the sound of her breath and our souls slipping away."*

There is a raise of Allahu Akbar in the air as they lift Aman's body from the floor and I see not, a man who was an ordinary kisaan making jokes for the applause of other men. I see a man who could summon the skies to applaud for him but the jalebi was too sweet, too deep, he drowned, a spiral too infinite, he lost his way forever.

I'm standing in the doorway, my cheeks moistening unconsciously when Bhai nudges me with his elbow.

"I thought you didn't like him."

I'm glad nobody reads in Shahpur, and the local secrets, remain unravelled.

"Nobody should make racist, offensive Pathan jokes" I say, quickly feigning indifference.

"Chacha Aslam was a Pathan, didn't you know? Sort of okay if he jokes about his own kind." He smirks a little and then joins the other men for the janaza.

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Amma is sitting on a charpai we keep on the roof top.

She looks so sad but maybe, I've never seen her look so beautiful before either.

Her shoulders are draped with a gold chador, that flutters like its alive every time the wind caresses it.

I sit beside her and take her palm in both of my hands and clasp it tight.

I know that she knows.

She knows that I know.

Two women bearing the saddest truth in their hearts for now and ever.

"Ye mard bhi kia ajeeb cheez hai, Men are peculiar beings" she says softly, "It was a man, my father, who took the strongest feeling I had ever felt, away from me. It was a man, my

husband, who struck my cheek every time the shorba was bland, how could it be not bland, Deena? But then again, it was a man, for whom I was willing to walk in the river for. The river that spares nothing of human life, not the soul, not the body."

She cries a little. A tiny speck of tear scarring her cheek, as if it emerged somewhere from the sky, not her eyes.

Her eyes have nothing more to spare.

"A woman should never love Deena" she looks at me, "There is no place in this world for a woman who loves. You grow up running around the village bazaars, picking flowers, eating fruits straight from the branch, you grow up thinking you can do whatever you please, that you're in control of what you want out of life until you realize you don't even get to choose who you share the rest of your life with."

I touch the tear on her cheek and it evaporates as if it wasn't even real.
Maybe, it wasn't.