



RAHBAR KISAN INTERNATIONAL

IFFAT

Published on August 1, 2024

Document Date: Mon, Dec 23 2024 04:31:41 pm

Category: ,English,Literature - ,Snippets

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Iffat Died today ! I jokingly used to call her Old woman, but when I went to get her

burial permission certificate from the Canterbury County Council, I had to fill a form where the date of birth of the deceased person had to be mentioned. I checked her passport to be accurate, but then I was taken aback, she was only 41 .But for me she had always been my Old Woman.

We washed her in lukewarm water in which Aab E Zamzam had been mixed, shrouded her, and when laid her in an almond color coffin, facing Kaaba, Tanvir Ahmed Khan spontaneously said “ Hey, she looks like as if she is going to get admission in her first year in college.

It was perfectly true, because when she got married to me, she had just completed her final year from the Fatima Jinah Medical college Lahore. And when I buried her it looked

as if she was really going to get the admission in her first year. The 18 years in which we lived together had been as if two passengers were sitting at a platform waiting for their trains, the luggage had been booked and her train arrived before the schedule time and

she boarded the train and departed. My train is late, when it arrives I will also board it, but our luggage? It keeps on moving back and forth and there is nobody to claim it. And what actually we have got as our luggage? some papers, lot of books, few cloths, plenty of crockery and interior decor items, which Iffat has painstakingly amassed by visiting

different sales, and a boy named Saqib ! but Saqib is neither a belonging nor a friend, this boy of twelve years has suddenly become aged for me !

When the cascading clay enveloped even the last corner of the Iffat 's coffin, we, who were

standing gallantly watching all this, sat simultaneously down on the grass. Our knees refused to bear our weight and bent under the enormous inner burden. For a few seconds Saqib held my hand, pressed it strongly and then quietly loosen his grip.

We have never shed tears in front of each other and no such thing is in the foresight.

Alas, I don't have a kid whom I can hug and wail, instead I have a twelve years old, but aged man who has been appointed to take care of me as a father figure. He has learned this artistry from his mother. When my mother died, five years after our marriage, Iffat smartly took over her entire role. Identically, as if, right after the death of Iffat, Saqib became my caretaker. Don't know what kind of person this pair of son and the mother are, that they dive into the ocean of life and death by having the sail of gratitude and patience, and leave me high and dry as if I'm not a human but a rock. Nevertheless, may God be happy with them in this world and hereafter, for I am not worthy of both the worlds.

What a miserable forlornness it is !

I guess that Iffat had the measure of this strange loneliness I have. Although she never talked about it, but she did everything possible to fill this nameless vacuum and she continued her efforts for

eighteen long years. Right before exactly fifteen days into her death, the dramatic climax of all this appeared to me. It was a Sunday in June, when bright sunshine was pouring down on everything, and Iffat along with Saqib was busy sowing the seeds of coriander, mint, tomatoes and cabbage in the seedbed of our lawn.

She watered some rose plants and then we sat down there chatting away. "How beautiful and scenic all this is, I am sure that paradise would be somewhat similar to it", she said very confidently. Don't know, I replied, to which she cackled with laughter. This was the last time I heard laughing with full joy. "You don't tell me anything, whatever Mumtaz Mufti writes, gives me the impression that he knows you more than I do, why don't you open up with me"? I said "you know Mumtaz Mufti, he is one great fiction writer, whatever he likes he put it on the paper, he has put a green turban on my head which he has scented with musk and camphor and has made me a strange idol, he deliberately runs away from faith and at the same time puts his belief in it, so do not pay any heed to him"

She smiled and said "Mumtaz Mufti is such a bizarre person, he plays with Saqib for hours but when he leaves after talking about you with me, I feel like your widow and not the wife! "That's the epitome of his fiction writing" I said. Forget about Mufti, let's enjoy the day, this kind of sunshine is a rarity in this country, she giggled. She got up after this,

quickly cooked minced meat with peas,boiled some rice, made salad and served us lunch, after which she went to her room dressed up in a purple coloured shalwar gameez, put on makeup and when she emerged from her room dressed up to nines, Saqib exclaimed, “wow mom you look great, dad seems to be in trouble today”, “don’t talk nonsense”, she admonished Saqib. “You better take out your bicycle and go to Khalid’s home, today is the birthday of Tariq and we will also join you there by five in the evening.” Saqib looked at his watch and said in a mischievous way “but it’s only 2 PM right now, what are you going to do until 5 PM?”

“We will enjoy and now you may go” she ordered Saqib, I looked at her and said “you look in a great mood today, what are you up to?” Her eyes suddenly filled with tears, “I am of no use to you now, let’s go to park” we went to our favorite nearby park where young and old couples were laying on the grass, embracing each other. Roses were in their full blossom, the cherry trees were covered with pink and red flowers and several fountains were running. Multi Coloured drinks and cold milk bottles were on sale in the park.

We sat down on a wooden bench, she took an intricate look at the surroundings and said

“Paradise would be somewhat similar to this I guess” no,I said. “You do not tell me anything” she said in an almost protesting manner “Mumtaz Mufti knows you better than I do”. “He is a novelist

so just forget about him and what he says and talk about us” I said. “I have nothing to say except that I couldn’t be of any use to you”, she replied.

“Well just say something good and do not talk rubbish” I said.

“Really?” she said in the manner of a child who would ask for some money to buy candies. “you won’t mind? Will you not interrupt me, and wont evade me?”

She laid down on that wooden bench we have been sitting on, and put her head in my lap using it as a pillow, after my reassurance that I wouldn’t do any of those things.

“So listen now, bury me in the canterbury graveyard, when I die” her words hit me like a thunderbolt, but since i had promised her not to interrupt that’s why i kept quiet.

She kept on, “I love this city, the hospital here has given me great comfort, beside all this

I feel that this city is blessed by the saintly presence of Mother Mary”. “Do you also feel the same, or not?” She looked at me, lifting her head slightly. she then dried my teary eyes with her purple dupatta and continued nonchalantly, “do not call anyone to my funeral as everybody is so busy in this country, you, Saqib, Khalid, sister Abida and few muslims friends of Khalid who are doctors would be more than enough”. I gathered myself, and said “Tanvir Ahmed Khan from Germany and Naseem Anwer Beg from Paris might come, so what do you say about them”. “Sure if they come, no

issues”, she agreed.

“They are our own people, but make sure that nobody comes from Pakistan”. And why is that? I asked her, “there are few who can afford to travel to UK they might come, there are many of our relatives who can not manage due to financial constraints, will feel bad”

I laughed remorsefully, is that all Madam, or are there any other instructions and wishes?

“Must engrave La Ilaha Illallah Muahmmed Arasol Allah on my tombstone”. for sure, I replied.

“Any more decree her excellency” i asked her, “yes there is an entreaty”. “Please learn to trim your nails, see how Saqib at such a tender age trims his nails so smartly, but you can’t even do this small task”. She got up after saying this, took out a pair of tiny scissors from her purse and said “give me your hand so that I can trim your nails once more”. After this last service to me she trimmed my nails and then embraced me tightly, and started to caress my hair. It felt so good because we never sat like this so openly, but the message of farewell was so intense and evident from her chat, that it made me increasingly nervous. Holding back my tears, I said “Madam get up, what these kids who are playing around us would think of us, what kind of passionate love this old couple is engaged in”? She got up from lap in a flash and smilingly replied “People would think that a lusty old man has lured a young age girl here”

“Have you ever seen yourself in a mirror’? She asked, “yes on a daily basis I do”, was my reply. She combed my hair with her conoid fingers for the last time and said, “your hair have turned so much white, I have told you to use shampoo at least once in a month, but you do not heed to any of my advice”. She made me laugh by tickling me and said “I want to tell you a very fascinating thing, please do listen carefully”. Then she started to tell me proudly. “

About two years back while I was shopping at Oxford street with Mrs. Akhter, we met one of her friends, Mrs.Akhter introduced me to her as Iffat Shahab”.

“Hearing this, her friend replied impromptu, Oh, we thought that Mr.Shahab only had a son, we never knew that he had an elder daughter as well”. “Let’s move from here now as the clock is approaching five and we have to attend the birthday party of Tariq”, I said sheepishly. This was our last comprehensive sitting together, as we have never talked so much with each other concomitantly. We often had long chats jointly with our friends and relatives, but never did we talk so much on so many diverse topics for so long!

So much so that when I resigned from my Government job, I thought it to be appropriate to share it with her. She was busy making omelet for Saqib for his school lunch, when I told that I wanted to resign. without even lifting her head towards me and leaving the spoon she was using to make omelet, she said, “go ahead please, if that’s what you need to do”. Her indifferent attitude towards

a serious matter made irked me a bit, “ and how can I decide this without your consent, and you do not seem to have any interest in it”

I said in a complaining voice. She put down the spoon, looked at me so lovingly which she never did before that day and said, “ hey , how could I make you understand that

my consent is what yours is”. I had this self-conceit that I was the only one in search of annihilation or dying before one’s own death, but I never knew that Iffat had already moved past that terminus.

As she lay shrouded in her coffin I lovingly but quietly touched her head for the last time, I had many baseless hopes hidden deep inside me

due to my superstitions, but none came true, she had died ! I buried her in the cemetery

and that’s all.

Our marriage was not without the normal and minute misunderstandings, innocent grievances and short term peevs, and occurred as often as they should between a married couple, but our real brawl happened only once. When in Islamabad, I planned to buy a carpet for our drawing room. With great enthusiasm I selected a white carpet with colorful flowers in the middle. But Iffat summarily rejected it, as if she wanted to return stale vegetables to a cunning greengrocer. This anguished me a lot and I did not talk to her all day, until she lay down beside me in the bedroom for

the night. “ Listen you already have a spherical face but when you are upset it becomes even more podgy”, she said by putting her hands on my cheeks. “ why are you so upset today”? I touched the topic of the carpet. “well the carpet is excellent without a doubt but it is useless for us”

And why do you say so, I asked her. “Nobody of the type comes to visit us, for whom this carpet is made for” she said. “ And what do you mean by that?” I asked her resentfully.

She got up ,sat, and then started to explain like a school teacher, “ Ibn e Insha used to visit us, he sits with his legs stretched out, puts oranges on one side and peanuts on the other while a heap of sugar cane cutlets in front. Jamil Uddin Aali also comes, and he lie-down on the floor as soon as he arrives, starts chain smoking and flicks the ash everywhere on the carpet and not in the ashtray. Whenever Mumtaz Mufti comes he carries betel leaves in his one hand and the tobacco in other. Ashfaq Ahmed put a newspaper on the carpet and cut the watermelon over it, Esaar Raai brings mangoes and sweet melons from Multan and Jaseem Uddin brings Bananas and a seeping basket of sweets from Dhaka, all of them put all these gifts on the carpet with great fervour. Many times per year, Syed Mumtaz Hussain Shah at the age of sixty, comes for the preparation of the examination of M.A English, and sprays the ink of his fountain pen on our carpet while studying. There is only one man Raja Shafiq, that whenever he visits us, he puts the fresh butter, Mustard leaves curry and Maize flour bread, which he brings from his village, in the kitchen instead of

pouring it onto the carpet, this is because he is neither a poet nor a writer, rather he is just a friend of our friends.” She was damn right, therefore we bought a dark coloured carpet and reconciled.

Iffat had a great affection with my friends, she not only appreciated writers but at the same time she had a great sense of admiration for literature. She knew by rote hundreds of verses from Shahnama E Islam and used to respect Hafeez Jalandhri like a father figure. She admired a lot, the book by Josh YADONKI BARAT as well. Once I asked her to accompany me while I was going to meet Josh Sahab, but she refused saying “grass is greener for me as far as Josh Sahab is concerned”

When the country was ruled by Yahya Khan, Faiz Ahmed Faiz came to London. We lived quietly in a small village in England at that time. Faiz called me from London and said that I would visit you tomorrow and will have lunch with you. She cooked many delicious dishes for Faiz Sahab. It was peak winter and snowfall when Faiz Sahab came to my house after traveling for an hour by train, half an hour by bus and about fifteen minutes by foot. Her eyes became teary when Faiz Sahab hobbled his way to our house in knee deep snow. While heating the lunch she held my hands and said “how lucky are we that one of the greatest poets of our era has come to visit us in such terrible weather.”

“This is his kindness and nothing else” I said. She ameliorated me and said, “no this is his greatness and generosity instead”.

In our best of the days one of her favorite poetry line was “let us live now at a place where no one else lives” (), and probably she had herself formulated the second line, “no earth, no time and no heaven shall be there” (). During her ailment she used to repeatedly recite (Ibn e Mariyam huwa karay koi, meray dukh ki dawa karay koi).

“Let there be a son of Marry, let there be one to treat my agony.”

We went through severe financial hardships during our three years of statelessness. Once when had to translocate for the third or fourth time, she packed our belongings after great a hardship, and like after a severe rainfall a broken roof starts to trickle, It looked as if fatigue was oozing from every pore of her body. “Iffat, you have gone through tremendous hardship because of me”, I said, pressing her calves.

“Hey I am way too happy with you KOKAY but I feel sorry for Saqib, this is his eighth school at such a tender age”, she used to lovingly call me KOKA sometimes, just like my late mother. “Well Saqib is our son and he adopts well everytime in his new school but I get a scary feeling watching you so

worn out, are you ok?" placing her head on my shoulder and closing her eyes she said, "yes im alright"

But I could hear every tissue of hers wailing a verse of Ghalib,

,

"Why not the continuous routine makes my heart sad"

"After all I am human and not just a wine glass and bottle of booze"

I guess that hardship and labour during the period of that wandering was the reason for that malady which ultimately made her an inmate to the canterbury cemetery. And now this sense of guilt after turning into feeling of crime, mercilessly lashes my conscious, but i can not do anything, after all a poor, Iniquitous, slave of one's own mischievous self can not do anything.

“If ever i have the ability to ask from dust that, o you worthless”

“what have you done with those treasures of very high value”

A chapter from Shahab Nama by Qudrat Ullah Shahab.

Translated by: Kaleem Shahzad Khan

29.07.2024. Doha