

My Dear Zainab,

Baba ki jaan, whenever I see you engrossed in your books, my heart brims with joy. You are barely fourteen, and yet so remarkably wise.

Today, while playing, when you happened to pull an old letter of your grandmother's, that is my beloved *amma's*, out of my drawer, seeing her Urdu handwriting I was overwhelmed with sadness. She would often, before going to sleep at night, find stories from her books to narrate to us.

Whenever a mushaira was held in the city, *Amma* would hasten to finish the day's household chores. She would then get your *Phuppo* and me ready, and we would set off at once.

Across the wall, there stood a small *madrasa*, run regularly from Asr until Maghrib by the daughters of Taqi *sahib*, whom we affectionately called *Phuppa*. In return for a modest fee of a hundred rupees, they would leave us pupils blessed with the priceless wealth of knowledge.

It was during my lessons at this very *madrasa* that my love for Urdu first took root. There was the *madrasa* on one hand, and *farsh-e-aza* on the other. Before long, we had committed Mir Anees's *marsiya*s to memory, along with verses by Dabeer.

Once, when I was a child, *Abba* took me to the dargah of Hazrat Nizamuddin on the occasion of Basant. I went and sat near a qawwal who, lost in his melody, was singing a *ghazal* by Khusrau—

Do not turn away from the plight of this wretched one,

casting your eyes away and weaving excuses:

For I cannot bear the anguish of separation, my love

why do you not take me and clasp me to your breast?

The *ghazal* echoed in my ears like the *azaan* and sank deep into my soul.

This *ghazal* is often attributed to Amir Khusrau, though some scholars maintain that its authorship is difficult to verify. Be that as it may, it possesses the rare art of weaving two languages, Hindavi and Persian, into a single *ghazal*.

Meanwhile, in the Deccan, Muhammad Quli Qutub Shah gave this very language a new stature through his divan. Do you know that he is regarded as Urdu's first *sahib-e-divan* poet, the first to leave behind a collected volume of verse?

Your grandfather, may God grant *Abba jaan* salvation, had impressed Wali Dakhani's name upon my mind while I was still a child. Urdu *ghazals* had been written and recited before him in the form of Rekhta, but Persian still held them firmly in its sway. It was owing to Wali Dakhani that the course of poetry in *Hindustani* turned from Persian towards Urdu. Scholars differ considerably over Wali *Sahib's* place of birth, but Wali Dakhani himself put a full stop to the debate with a single couplet—

*Wali is renowned throughout Iran and Turan
though he is a poet of the land of the Deccan*

Zainab, I hope that someday you will read the Urdu *qasidas* of Mirza Muhammad Rafi Sauda as well. In the vigor of his language and its grandeur and splendor, you will experience a new delight in Urdu.

My child, in the course of its long life, Urdu has known the embrace of royal courts as well as the darkness of prison cells. Bahadur Shah Zafar, who first gave refuge to Mirza Zauq and then to Ghalib, only to later be banished from his own city by the British, if there is any language that could gather his sorrow into itself and bear it, it was Urdu alone—

*The nightingale bears no grievance against the gardener, nor against the fowler;
it was fated to be caged in the season of spring.
How ill-fated is Zafar! For his burial,
he found not two yards of earth in the beloved's lane.*

In the later generations, Daghlvi, with his distinctive turn of phrase, lent immortality to the delicacy of love and the freshness of expression in Urdu *ghazal*. And this same Urdu, which had carried with it the burden of Zafar's sorrows and hopes, was in time granted new life by the power of Allama Iqbal's pen—

*Raise your selfhood to such heights that, before each decree of fate,
God himself may ask His servant, "Tell me, what is your will?"*

My first acquaintance, technically, with Iqbal came through *Saare Jahaan Se Accha*, which I sang at school, and through *Lab Pe Aati Hai Dua*. Did you know that the principal of a school in Azamgarh was even sent to prison for having this prayer recited? But prayers belong to everyone and are for everyone. And if they lead one to prison, what of it? At least they have reached God.

One day I heard the news of Amjad Sabri's passing. That very day, I searched for his rendition of *Jawab-e-Shikwa* on Youtube. Believe me, Zainab, my soul was suffused with its fragrance!

That reminds me of a story. One of Iqbal sahib's friends, Maulana Hasrat Mohani, always travelled third class. One day, someone asked him, "Brother Maulana, why do you always travel third class? You go to Parliament in a *tonga*, and instead of living in the government residence, you spend your nights in the mosque." Maulana replied, with customary courtesy, "*Bhai*, I travel third class because they have not yet invented a fourth." What a remarkable man he was!

Do you remember when I took you to Lucknow? My childhood was spent in the lanes of Masha-Ganj, and on my way to and fro I would often pass the Rifa-e-Aam Club. At times it hosted a fair, at others an exhibition, and now and then a wedding feast. Today it lies in ruins, neglected like a refuse dump. For reasons known only to themselves, the poets, novelists and journalists of that age came to feel that they ought all to gather beneath a single roof. And so, the Rifa-e-Aam Club was chosen. Everyone assembled there and, before long, the All-India Progressive Writers' Association came into being. The Association held its first session at the Rifa-e-Aam Club, where Munshi Premchand delivered the presidential address.

Zainab, do you remember that right beside the Rifa-e-Aam Club stands City Station, in whose embrace lies buried *Khuda-e-Sukhan*, Mir Taqi Mir? After the decline of the Mughal Empire and the devastation of Delhi in the eighteenth century, Mir made his way to Lucknow, where he found patronage at the Nawab's court. He was never quite able to accept Lucknow as his home—

*Delhi's lanes were not mere streets, they were illustrated pages;
whatever form the eye encountered, it appeared as a picture.*

One may leave Delhi behind, but how is one to drive Delhi from the heart? Yet it is a matter of profound sorrow that when the railway tracks were laid around the City Station, Mir's grave was lost. No amount of lament can suffice for such a loss.

The very Delhi that Mir could never remove from his heart was also the city in whose air Nazeer Akbarabadi gave Urdu nazm a new breadth. Meanwhile, in the literary gatherings of Lucknow, Imam Bakhsh Nasikh and Khwaja Haider Ali Aatish refined the tradition of Rekhta and their love for Urdu through the elegance of their language.

In any case, whether one's love is for a woman, a homeland, or a language, it so often falls victim to politics, power, and self-interest. A woman, whether she acknowledges this truth or not, bears the burden of countless responsibilities at home, at work, and in society. In every age, restraints have been placed upon her thoughts and her speech. When most lacked the courage to speak, Kishwar Naheed began to write in the voice of all such women. She gave utterance to the silence of women who were afraid to demand their rights or express their emotions. *Hum Gunahgaar Aurtein (We Sinful Women)* is amongst her most celebrated poems, in which she gave expression to this very endeavour.

The country had won its freedom from the British, but had women attained that freedom too? The answer is not positive. And yet, these very "sinful" women walked shoulder to shoulder with men at every step, from the Quit India Movement to the Abducted Persons Recovery Act. Your *Dadi*, *Nani*, and *Ammi*, too, were among those courageous women who stood firm in the face of every struggle, fearless and undaunted.

Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, and people from every section of society had stood shoulder to shoulder, setting their differences aside, to stand against British rule. Your great-grandfather was also part of this movement. When he wrote an article against the British in an Urdu newspaper run by a friend, the colonial government imprisoned him alongside Mahatma Gandhi. Even today, the locked cupboards of his long-shuttered office hold all those letters and photographs, a treasury of his struggle for freedom and of the moments he spent with Gandhi.

In 1947, at last, *Hindustan* won its freedom. We were freed from British rule, but the price of that freedom was the division of our sacred land into two: India and Pakistan. The British

divided not only the land but sowed the seeds of hatred and sectarianism so deeply in the minds of its people that, even today, the two countries remain faithful to the enmity that sprang from them. Amid the anguish of Partition, your *Dadi* remained in India, while her brother migrated to Pakistan. Until her last breath, she would remember him and weep.

Freedom had come at last. But was this the freedom for which we all had waited? In his poem *Subh-e-Azadi*, Faiz Ahmed Faiz writes—

*This stained, stained light, this dawn wounded by the night,
this is not the dawn we had awaited.*

Indeed, this was not the dawn we had awaited. In the aftermath of Partition, political difficulties and hardships multiplied in both India and Pakistan. In 1977, as India was emerging from the deep wounds of the Emergency, in Pakistan, Zia-ul-Haq's government strengthened the military's hold over the country and imposed martial law. Amid these difficulties, certain individuals, among them poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz and artist Iqbal Bano, emerged as embodiments of resistance. On 13th February 1986, at the Alhamra Arts Council in Lahore, Iqbal Bano appeared before a packed audience, dressed in a black sari and red lipstick, and sang *Hum Dekhenge*. The sari itself was forbidden, and the poem was banned as well. And yet, they say, what unfolded was a sight enough to raise goosebumps.

Gudiya, during Muharram, when all the women would gather at Hussain Sahib's home for Majlis, your *Dadi* would often climb on the *mimbar* in secret, after the *majlis* had ended and recite one of Habib Jalib's poems. She used to say that there was a strength in Jalib's words—the strength to stand like a wall against oppression and tyranny. Jalib, who was honored with the title *Shair-e-Awam (the People's Poet)*, was nothing short of a hero to your grandmother.

In 1959, when General Ayub Khan proclaimed martial law in Pakistan, almost all media houses and other organs of the press were sternly forbidden from writing against the government. Amid this atmosphere, Radio Pakistan convened a gathering of poets. While all other poets presented *ghazals* and verses in praise of their “beloved Pakistan” and its government, Habib Jalib took to the radio and declared through his poem—

*There is the smoke of tear gas; there is a rain of bullets;
How can we praise you, O night of an age of short-sightedness?*

The moment the poem was broadcasted, the radio station was raided, and the following day Habib Jalib and the station director were arrested. *Gudiya*, when I think of the incident today, I can see little difference between the Pakistan of those days and the India of today.

The blessed month of Ramadan is about to begin, my child. When we were children, every year we would wait for Eid with great impatience. We would spend the whole day collecting *Eidi*, and by evening would make a beeline for the film-cassette shop. Once, a week before Ramadan, your *Dada Abbu* bought your *Dadi Jaan* a VCR player for her birthday. It remained idle throughout the month of Ramadan, of course, but on the day of Eid it was put to splendid use from morning till night.

Since the VCR player had been brought for your grandmother, she was asked to choose the first film. She laughed and said, "We'll watch *Pyaasa*." There and then, all my dreams of a good old *dishoom-dishoom* film fell to pieces. With a long face, I went and rented a cassette of *Pyaasa*, and as soon as we returned home, everyone gathered in the drawing room. The film began, and as the story unfolded, a strange silence descended upon the room. Guru Dutt's character of the wronged, impassioned poet...uff. His story left everyone deeply unsettled. But one thing left the deepest impression of all: the song written by Sahir Ludhianvi, *Jinhe Naaz Hai Hind Par Woh Kahaan Hain*. I was quite young then, Zainab, but even at that age, Sahir's writing left me immersed in thoughts far deeper than my years. Sahir questioned the section of Indian society which takes pride in itself on being the guardians of the nation, yet when women are forced into prostitution, when laborers are pushed into the quagmire of poverty, when ordinary people are crushed beneath the weight of systematic oppression, these very guardians blindfold themselves and become silent spectators.

This was all it took. I took all the *Eidi*, and went straight to the bookshop, where I bought every book of Sahir's I could find. When I returned home and began turning the pages, I came across the words *Taj Mahal* in one of the books. I had my first opportunity to see the Taj Mahal when your grandfather was invited to a mushaira in Agra. But that day, even this dream was reduced to dust, piece by piece, when I read Sahir's poem *Taj Mahal*. In his poem, Sahir laid bare the sacrifices of all those laborers who built the Taj Mahal, yet whose

identities disappeared into the pages of history. The very Taj Mahal that is sold to us as a symbol of love, Sahir revealed instead as a monument to social and economic injustice.

Ever since that day, whenever the Taj Mahal would be mentioned, a line written by Sahir would rise unbidden in my mind—

*By the strength of his wealth, an emperor;
has made a mockery of the love of us poor.*

Last week, when we were cleaning your grandfather's cupboard—do you remember?—you found some photographs and letters among these piles of clothes.

Those photographs and letters had scarcely come before me when a whole procession of old memories came to life. In Lucknow, your Dada had a dear friend named Dr. Afzal Ahmad. Your grandfather would always stay at his home whenever he visited the city. By profession, Afzal *mian* was a lawyer, but he was also a devoted custodian of Urdu literature and a poet. Both Afzal *mian* and his father were among the favored disciples of the renowned poet Arzoo Lakhnawi, and in his name, they ran an organization known as *Anjuman-e-Arzoo*. Through this organization, Afzal *mian* would arrange mushairas, literary gatherings, and cultural programs, which were also attended by celebrated poets from across the border. Distinguished poets such as Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Ahmad Faraz, Iftikhar Arif, Bashir Badr, Siraj Lakhnawi, and Arzoo Lakhnawi himself would lend these *mushairas* their grandeur. Not only poets, but celebrated artists also took part in the *mushairas* organized by *Anjuman-e-Arzoo*, among them are figures like Prithviraj Kapoor and Begum Akhtar.

The letters we found in your grandfather's cupboard were from those very poets and literary figures who, even after Partition, continued to send ghazals and verses to Afzal *mian*. Some of these treasured letters were later given to your *Dada* by Afzal *mian* as gifts.

As I was reading a letter, among them, that Fahmida Riaz had written to Afzal *mian*, I found that she not only spoke of Afzal *mian*'s century-old house and the *rasawal* prepared by his wife, Seemi, but also mentioned a few photographs taken by one of her students at Jamia University when Afzal *mian*, *Abba Huzoor*, and I had gone to meet her in Delhi.

In those days, Fahmida Riaz was serving as Poet-in-Residence at Jamia Millia Islamia. Owing to political persecution and official investigations in Pakistan, she sought refuge in

India, where she spent seven years in exile. I still remember the day Fahmida *Phuppo* seated me in her lap and recited her poem '*Ek Ladki Si.*' When she had finished, I asked with all the innocence of a child, "Is my *Ammi* imprisoned too?" Throwing back her head with laughter, she replied, "She was. She is now free."

Before long, a few more people arrived, and that brief meeting took on the air of a literary gathering. People began reading their own poetry, their own poems. When it was *Abba Huzoor's* turn, he grew a little nervous. He turned the pages of his *divan*, but no words came out of his mouth. Fahmida *Phuppo* sensed his unease. With a smile, she leaned towards him and said softly, "Only when a poet's heart is trembling do his words truly leave a mark."

Your grandfather looked at her for a moment, then lowered his gaze and said, "I have written a few verses in *Rekhti*, inspired by my *begum's* thoughts and the busy life she leads. I had always imagined I would keep these verses to myself, but today I find the courage to share them in this gathering."

After hearing your grandfather's poetry, Fahmida *Phuppo* smiled faintly. Then, turning to Afzal *mian*, she said, "You ought to introduce your friend to Sajid Sajni Lakhnavi." Though a native of Lucknow, Sajid Sajni Lakhnavi made his home in Bhopal. He was among the last celebrated poets of *Rekhti*. Though a man himself, he wrote of women's desires and emotions with remarkable freedom, adopting their voice in his poetry. Your *Dada* and *Dadi*, however, would always argue over this very subject: that *Rekhti* had always been written by men and for men. *Dadi* always maintained that only a woman could truly understand and articulate a woman's feelings. Until women begin telling their own stories through poetry, she would say, they will never be able to bring their reality before the society. Today, even after seventy-nine years of Independence, whenever I look at the condition of women, I find myself thinking that perhaps she was right.

One day, when your grandfather and grandmother were seated on a *charpai* in the courtyard, once again locked in debate over *Rekhti*, a fax arrived from Afzal *mian*. In it was the news of Parveen Shakir's fatal road accident and her untimely passing. Your *Dada* rose at once and, leaning on his walking stick, made his way to his room. There, he opened an old trunk of books and drew out a worn diary. Tucked inside were a few verses written in Parveen Shakir's own hand, along with a photograph of her. He gently kissed the photograph, then pressed the diary to his chest and sat down in a corner. Your *Dadi* came and sat beside him, but neither spoke a word. To *Abba*, Parveen *Phuppo* was like a sister. It was through her that

the voices of young women and their concerns found a place in his literary taste and in his writing. In her short life of just forty-two years, Parveen Shakir gave Urdu poetry a style that was unparalleled.

My daughter, there was once a time in Pakistan when Ibn-e-Safi's *Imran Series* could be found beneath the pillows of boys, while Parveen Shakir's *Khushbu* lay beneath the pillows of girls.

That day, your grandfather wept for nearly an hour. Perhaps even I cannot begin to measure the depth of his grief. Then, he emerged from the room on unsteady feet and sat in the veranda with Parveen Shakir's *Khushboo* in his hands. He had scarcely turned a few pages when, all at once, a fierce wind swept through the house, and a loose page fluttered out into the courtyard. I had just stepped forward to retrieve it when the rain began to fall in earnest. Then, from behind, came *Abba's* voice, reciting one of Parveen *Phuppo's* most beloved couplets—

*Some of it was the chill in the air, and some of it was the thought of you;
Alongside happiness, the heart continued to feel a quiet melancholy as well.*

It is said that Parveen Shakir was very fond of the rain, and it is an odd coincidence that both at her birth and at her departure from this world, heavy rain was there to welcome her and to bid her farewell. Only a few months after this incident, *Abba Huzoor* passed away too.

On your grandfather's *chaliswan*, when your *Phuphi* was looking for a sheet to spread over the mattress laid out in the courtyard, she found Bashir Badr's book *Ikai*. She carried it over to me. When she brushed the dust from its worn cover, tucked onto the first page was an old, yellowed scrap of paper. It was a letter Bashir Badr had sent to your grandfather along with the book. The ink had faded with time, and only the last few lines could still be made out. They were one of his own couplets—

*People break themselves building a single home,
yet you feel no pity when entire settlements are burned down.*

Your *Dadi* told me and your *Phuphi*, that, before this, the only other time your grandfather had wept so utterly was when he heard that Bashir's house had been burnt down during the Meerut riots of 1987. In those days, your grandfather found some solace in the loneliness and restlessness that found expression in Muneer Niazi's poetry.

Before we knew it, the twenty-first century had arrived, and all the great poets of that bygone era had passed on. In this new age, Urdu was not only tied to a national identity but was also made to wear the mantle of Muslim identity. This distinction had not even been made in the nineteenth century, when Lallu Lal Ji composed *Prem Sagar* at Calcutta's Fort William College in the Devanagari script, with a profusion of Sanskrit vocabulary. Until then, Hindustani had not yet been divided into Hindi and Urdu, and Hindustani was written in the Nastaliq script. The flames of this division had not yet caught hold. But then, with the Partition of India and the communal riots that followed, the paths of Urdu and Hindustani were made to diverge. In the end, Urdu poetry, too—particularly in the Nastaliq script—was left desolated.

But there is a more hopeful side to this story: with the passage of time, a new generation once again embraced Urdu. In the twenty-first century, following the currents of modernism and postmodernism, there are some poets amongst poets of this new era who broke away from the constraints of traditional forms—such as *behr* and *qaafiya*—and begun using a new language in their poetry, one that is referred to in English as “slang poetry.” Zainab, among them is your favourite *Phuphi* and poet, Sabika Abbas. I know that you listen to her poetry day and night, and that you even try to write like her.

Of course, what is worth reflecting upon is that in Urdu literature and poetry, love and revolution have always moved forward, shoulder to shoulder, alongside one another.

Do you remember, Zainab, when I took you to Shaheen Bagh? Amidst that gathering of thousands, one could see a new India taking shape, an India that was not dependent on the power of politicians.

Your *Phuphi* Sabika took you up on stage, where you recited one of her poems alongside her. And then Sabika welcomed Amir Aziz using these words: “Friends, we now have a poet coming up whose poem has become the voice of our protest. The voice of the common man. The voice of a united India. I invite Amir Aziz.”

And when Amir Aziz began reciting *Sab Yaad Rakha Jayega*, all of Shaheen Bagh rang out as one collective voice. Finally, exhausted, you fell asleep around three in the morning, right there among the grandmothers at the camp.

A pang rises in my heart when I see how ruthlessly the Urdu language is being crushed in India today. But then, the world rests on hope, does it not, Zainab?

Just a few days ago, when you went for your tuition, Raghu *Chacha's* son Babu came by with some sweets. He was sharing how he ranked first in his first year at Jamia College in Delhi. When the subject of Urdu language came up, he went on to say that Urdu is compulsory for the first two years at Jamia, and that these days he is learning to read and write it. When I asked him who he was learning Urdu from, the rascal laughed and said, "From the Urdu rap of Talha Anjum and Faris Shafi."

Urdu is no longer confined to books. It now echoes through the streets, moves to the beat, and becomes part of processions. Talha Anjum, Faris Shafi, Young Stunners and a host of new Urdu rap artists are bringing hip-hop and poetry together in a way that carries both the cry of revolution and the whispers of love. And perhaps the most beautiful thing of all is that a new generation, one that may once have been distant from the written word and letters of Urdu, is finding its way back to the language, even if through rap.

Zainab, the apple of *Baba's* eye, today, through this letter, I want to tell you how fortunate a father I consider myself. Reasons are endless, but one of them is that I see you taking such keen interest in Urdu. My wish is that, as you grow older, you come to understand Urdu in your own way, make it your language, and give wings to your family's literary legacy.

You are my hope, Zainab. I pray that you, too, will find a place of your own in the world of literature, so that the heart of this beautiful language may go on beating forever, somewhere, in some gathering, upon the pages of a book, in a *mushaira*, or in a *ghazal* written for a beloved. May it just keep beating until the end of time, that's all. And remember, my dear, Urdu can never come to an end, nor will the journey of this language ever stop, so long as there remains even a single person in the world who loves it. Jigar Moradabadi put it beautifully—

*The world has not the strength to erase us;
the world exists through us, we do not exist through the world.*

Countless love and prayers,
Your *Abba*, Taha