Intizar Hussain

An Epic Unwritten

Ek Binlikhi Razmiya

In Qadirpur, too, such a fierce battle broke out that people put their hands over their ears in denial when they heard it. Confusion was rampant. Human lives everywhere went dirt cheap. One person was killed taking two steps back, another taking four steps forward. One was hit in the back, another on the chest. How could Qadirpur, insignificant as it was, stem the tide that had shaken even the roots of mountains? But thanks to Pichwa’s presence, Qadirpur became the scene of a memorable exploit. Knowing they were facing death, people put on their shrouds, asked for their mothers’ blessings, committed their wives to God, and marched into battle with such valour and majesty that they revived the memory of wars fought in ancient times. A fierce battle broke out, with incredible bloodshed – heaps of corpses everywhere. The Jats were not wanting in character and ceremony either. Since Qadirpur’s entire fame rested on Pichwa, the bravest of the Jats were gathered from far and near. Their elephants were lined up, cannon, gunpowder, arrows and swords arranged, and the Jat army, weighed down with equipment, set off to conquer Qadirpur on their caparisoned elephants, their torches lighting up the night.

In the branches of the banyan tree near the Eidgah, Majid sat guard. Seeing light beyond the trees further away, he pricked up his ears and very carefully studied the situation. Focusing his eyes, he listened attentively to all the noses
and tried to figure out the source of the light. Finally certain that the expected moment had at last arrived, he thundered out the news on his drum. As soon as the drum was struck, chaos broke out in the houses of Qadirpur. Asleep on the roof, Naim Mian’s two sons, Owais and Azhar, were completely baffled when they heard the slogans and drumbeats. Owais was speechless. Azhar, unable to do anything else, got up and leapt headlong over the roofs coming at last to the roof of the Weavers’ Mosque. There was a gap between the roofs here, and Azhar had to stop in his tracks. He had no idea about what to do next.

Keeping guard below, Rahmat now thumped his club and challenged, ‘Who’s there?’ Azhar pulled himself together with great difficulty and somehow managed to identify himself. Rahmat laughed and said, ‘Mian, you have disgraced the name of Aligarh College.’ Rahmat’s damning indictment stemmed from the fact that both Azhar and Owais were alumni of Aligarh, and in the pre-Partition days whenever they participated in political rallies and enthusiastically shouted the slogan ‘India will be divided; Pakistan will be created’, their voices resounded with an unusual note of determination. After the Partition of India, however, they made no sense whatsoever and their bravado seemed utterly out of place.

When Naim Miyan woke up, Azhar’s cot was empty and Owais was standing speechless. Confused, he grabbed his rifle and cartridge case, but the people at the meeting place suddenly raised the cry ‘Allah Akbar.’ with such gusto that
the cartridge case fell from his hand. There had been a vigil at the meeting place. People were now coming out, each one holding up his weapon.

Adjusting his turban, Jafar put his spear in position and started to draw on the hookah as he went out. Behind him, Pichwa straightened his lungi and called out, ‘This is no time for the hookah, my fried!’ Jafar put down the hookah and went out thumping his javelin on the ground. Pichwa tightened and knotted his lungi with great satisfaction and ran his fingers over the silver-plated amulet on his neck. Then he rolled up his shirt sleeves, spat on his palms and weighed his club in hand. On his way out he called for Mammad. Annoyed at getting no answer, he called out again, ‘Hey Mammad, you son of a bitch, where the hell are you?’

Throwing his vest around his neck, Mammad leapt out of a corner.

‘Here I am, Ustad.’

‘Hey, you son of an Ustad, are you coming out or not?’ Reaching him, Pichwa’s tone softened, ‘Now look, you hand on in the trench around the Weavers’ Mosque, and I’ll take care of everything here.’

After he had instructed Mammad, he left the meeting place followed by a few of his young wrestlers. As he came out, he glanced at the haveli. kalwa was leading the unit posted there. As soon as he saw Pichwa, he came to attention and shouted, ‘don’t worry, ustad, I’ll break anyone who comes here in half.’
Pichwa was most worried about the haveli entrenchment. And he had reason to be. All the women of the Qadirpur settlement were gathered in it. Although there was a dark well inside the haveli and each woman had been clearly told what her duty required in the eventuality, a few nooses had also been set up for good measure. Pichwas had stationed several of his brave young men at the haveli and had told them, ‘I’ll roast anyone of you bastards alive who shows the slightest weakness.’ Confident of Kalwa’s bravery and satisfied with what he had said, Pichwa went on, weighing his club. A feeling of urgency had now become noticeable in the drumbeats, and in the distance conch shells had begun to sound as well. Pichwa quickened his steps. People were beginning to pour out of the other houses. Qurban Ali came out of his house brandishing the side rail of a cot. When he had first heard the noise, he had hurriedly searched everywhere in the house but could not find even an ordinary piece of wood, let alone a regular weapon. First anger, then the pressure exerted by man’s instinctive inventiveness, he fell upon a cot and tore it apart in a flash. Although Saiyid Hamid Hasan had several beautiful walking sticks brought from Nainital and Dehra Dun as gifts, he had nothing resembling a club. Scrambling around, however, he and his wife finally managed to unearth a rotten, old swordstick. Munshi Sanaullah did not have to face this problem at all. In the front courtyard lay a piece of bamboo used to clear cobwebs from the rooms; he picked it up as he rushed out. Nor did the Subedar Sahib have to worry about a club. he had a matchlock gun which he always kept clean. In the
crowd of clubs, the raised barrels of a few other rifles were also visible. His pocket loaded with pellets, Hamid held in his hand a shiny black slingshot of shisham wood. A few steps behind Pichwa stood Rasula and Bhallan carrying on their shoulders an entire arsenal, including pomegranate-shaped fireworks, horns, and swords. Allah Razi’s party came behind them, dragging an odd-looking cannon. Now, this cannon had been fired once before, unfortunately in the direction of Allah Razi’s companions. Allah Razi had not had the foggiest idea how the damned thing worked. So, several men were badly wounded and a few others were arrested by the police in connection with the incident. Now, however, Allah Razi was sure that it would not be his companions but his enemies who would be beaten to a pulp. Normally armed with clubs, Pichwa’s companions, responding to the demands of time, had made a small modification to their weapons. No longer plain clubs, theirs now had short spears attached to them. Pichwa’s, however, was the same as it had always been, except that, having soaked it in oil for three days, it was a little more slippery than usual. So what? The slipperiness that comes from oil makes a club shinier; it does not, however, affect its ‘clubness’. It is the spear that destroys the ‘clubness’ of a club. With a spear attached to a club, it is no longer a club but a spear. Mammad’s, Kalwa’s, Rahmat’s and Jafar’s clubs had thus been reborn as spears. Pichwa’s, however, was still just a plain old club; for him, to modify it would have meant changing his whole mode of thinking. This club had become an inextricable part of his being. In a way it had given up its separate existence
and become an indissoluble part of his personality. Pichwa’s club, consequently, was not merely a club; it was Pichwa’s club. Nor was it like the staff of Moses, for that staff had a power of its own apart from Moses; and in a sense, although Moses needed the staff, the staff had no need of him. Pichwa’s club was, at any rate, Pichwa’s club. And although it too had performed many miracles, the miraculous power was in Pichwa’s arms, not in the club itself. The best proof of this was the time Pichwa was accidentally forced to fight without his club. Seeing him unarmed, the companions of Tidda the wrestle thought they could at last finish him off. Without hesitating a moment, Pichwa immediately took off his head cloth, tied a coin in it and started showing his skill. Within five minutes he had three of them lay their clubs down in sheer helplessness – the many wrists he broke may be considered extra. And then he let them have it, banging their heads with their own clubs. Tidda’s companions were not brave enough to stare down an opponent: a few cracked skulls and off they went.

Tidda’s poor young men, of course, were small fry. Pichwa was always ready to take on an entire village. It so happened that Pichwa was there when the people of Lachmanpur had enraged them by firing at peacocks when he could not find any ducks. Anyway, a commotion had broken out everywhere. Lachmanpur was nearby and country bumpkins rushed up from there carrying cudgels. Hardly one to stand around at such a time, Naim Mian was off like a
shot as soon as he heard all the noise. Hamida, at his wits’ end, darted off into a nearby cornfield. Only Allah Razi had apparently escaped unharmed, but as luck would have it, he landed in a field where a farmer was ploughing. The peasant whacked him in the face first and asked questions later. Saiyid Hamid Hasan’s slowness proved his undoing. Lacking any other alternative, he tried to sweet-talk them into letting him go, but his peasant captors knew better than that. The Subedar Sahib just stood there – utterly befuddled, unable to think or do anything. Pichwa was incensed. With a ‘Ya Ali’, he took up his club and beat them mercilessly, killing several peasants, smashing countless wrists, and spraining many more. And when the Subedar Sahib and Pichwa arrived back in Qadirpur, they brought along, in addition to the slaughtered peacocks, a whole pile of fine, heavy clubs,

It was only a coincidence that Pichwa and Tidda were at odds then over the hill woman Billo. Although Pichwa was not averse to female company once in a while, he was not particularly one for running after women, as his real interest lay elsewhere. He and tidda had already locked horns before over the affair with Nasira. Nasira had been legitimately accepted as a member of Tiddas’ wrestling group, although other people were not willing to accord him that status. Pichwa was never one to hold his tongue, and when he sat at Allah Razi’s paan shop, put the paan in his mouth and took a puff of his bidi, he became even more boastful.
As he sat there one day, seeing Narira he lost control of himself and shouted out, ‘Pay attention to me, not others!’ Nasira was very embarrassed. When Tidda found out about it, his blood began to boil. Anyone else he would have slaughtered, but this was a case of a camel against a mountain. Still, he was so incensed that he took Pichwa’s taunt as a provocation to war. The quarrel festered for several months; several skirmishes took place, but Tidda ended up humiliated every time. Not just this one quarrel; Tidda and Pichwa could never get along with each other.

Although Tidda was proud of his expertise, Pichwa refused to acknowledge that he had any. Whenever anyone mentioned Tidda, Pichwa would explode, ‘Bah, that son of a barber, that bastard, what does he know about wrestling? Mian, his party always puts up the poorest show in the wrestling matches at the taziyas.’

‘But, Khalifa,’ Allah Razi would reply mischievously, for the sake of continuing the argument, ‘now he’s training very hard.’

Pichwa grew even more heated, ‘Oh, to hell with his training; what’ll it get him anyway? It’s razors he’s worked with. What does he know about wielding a club?’
By now Mammad too was warmed up. ‘Ustad, this son of a barber must really want to get beaten up again. He thinks he’s the great Gama, but one slap and all the stuffing will come out of him.’

‘Mian, I’ve already beaten that moron’s brains in, but just look, the stupid fool still comes back for more.’

Mammad was not the kind to be content with great deeds of the past. He immediately retorted, ‘Ustad, that was a long time ago, and it’ll soon be forgotten. I swear to you, Ustad, I’ll beat those fellows till they can’t stand up.’

‘Now wait a minute. I’m itching for a fight with him myself. I’d clip the moron’s wings, but he keeps avoiding me.’

Pichwa’s excuse was partially correct. Although Tidda’s group was not all that weak, nor was it short of works when it came to talking big, the fact is that whenever the chance to confront Pichwa presented itself, Tidda always managed somehow to skirt the encounter.

Knowledgeable people in Qadirpur knew that Pichwa was a master of the art of *banaut*, but the superstitious kind circulated all sorts of stories about him. They said that Pichwa knew magic. And Bhallan suspected this more than most. He had openly expressed his feelings several times: ‘Mian, whatever it is, Pichwa must have some power.’
Rasula not only vehemently confirmed this, but also provided the proof: ‘By God, the thing that baffles me is that Pichwas once threw a jinn down to the ground. Now, I’ve seen a lot of banaut in my time, but, Mian, I don’t care what you know about moving the stick, no one can win against a jinn. You take it from me, he knows some spell!’

Allah Razi’s suspicions were aroused by the amulet Pichwa wore around his neck, but Hamida swore, saying, ‘I saw it with my own eyes. Behind the Eidgah, over a dilapidated tomb in the graveyard, Pichwas was standing on one foot reciting something. There’s no question that some fakir has given him a charm, and that charm is where his power comes from.’

Jafar’s story, however, was different. He would say, ‘Mian, the thing is that Pichwa showed such great courage when those bloody Hindus wanted to tear down the Weavers’ Mosque. Mian, you should’ve seen the way he moved his stick; he made the fools lose their wits. Well, that night what did Pichwa see in a dram but that Maula Ali was patting his back. So you see, this is all through the grace of Maula Ali’s feet; otherwise poor Pichwa and his banaut would not mean much.’

But these were all differences of opinions about cause and effect. That Pichwas was brave had been proved beyond doubt. Pichwa never gave people sufficient time to think twice about his bravery. Every now and then he would pick a fight with some group on some pretext or other and thus show off his powers.
Never concerned about how things would turn out, Pichwa fought without any stab of fear or thoughts of loss or gain. Moreover, purposiveness had never stained his art. Rather, it was the fight itself that mattered to him, and his club-fighting was free of any selfish interests. Consequently, when the storm of communal riots began, Pichwa put all other considerations out of his mind and concentrated on the fact that he would now have a chance to display publicly his skill with the club. With both authority and excitement, he ordered his band, ‘Tighten your belts, boys. After a long time dear Almighty God has finally heard us. We’re going to have the time of our lives – Allah be praised!’

When the members of the group heard this, they could not contain their happiness. Mammad burst out, ‘I swear by the Master, if Qadirpur doesn’t win, Mammad is not his father’s son.’

Kalwa boasted, ‘It’s true, my club has seen better days. But now I’ll dye it red again and bring out its true colour.’

Pichwa’s companions made the same elaborate preparations for the imminent fighting and bloodshed that people make for Eid. But all the preparations were wasted, for the tide of the fight turned before their very eyes. It was no longer a question of Qadirpur conquering, but of remaining undefeated. It took Pichwa a long time to realize the change in the way the wind was blowing. Offensive campaigns were all he had ever known, but what defensive action meant he came to learn the hard way only then. When he heard about the creation of
Pakistan, he received the news with a feeling of immense chill. He wrung his hands in despair and said with deep regret, ‘Mian, while we sat here rotting, they won the battle over there.’

Then he lost his temper and roundly cursed himself and all the people of Qadirpur for having been unaware. Certainly Pichwa was glad that the battle had been won, but he was also grieved that it was not his blood that had helped buy this empire. After he had lamented enough, he said, ‘Mian, what was to be has happened. Come on, let’s go to the peepul tree by the Eidgah and at least put up a Pakistani flag.’ The other people of Qadirpur swooned when they heard Pichwa’s idea. They tried hard to reason with him and explained where Pakistan actually was. Pichwa was flabbergasted. He could not understand how Qadirpur, where he lived, could be outside Pakistan. After hearing what people said, he gave up the idea of flying the Pakistani flag, but then, on the urging of Mammad and Kalwa, he decided that, as Pakistan had excluded them from its brotherhood, they would make their own separate Pakistan. Consequently, they decided to fly on the banyan tree by the Eidgah an Islamic flag representing Pichwa’s group, and not the flag of Pakistan. People were even more upset when they heard this. Already in bad shape, poor Naim Mian lost his senses altogether when he heard Pichwa’s idea. He explained the situation to Pichwa and made every attempt to dissuade him. All Pichwa answered was, ‘now you listen to me, Mian, no Congress flag is going to fly in
Qadirpur; we’re going to put up the flag of Pichwa’s wrestling group.’ Naim Mian was extremely worried and upset, but what could he do? Pichwa was no longer under his control. He had been very obedient and respectful before, but for several days now Pichwas had begun to complain against him, announcing his rebellion openly. Actually, even Naim Mian was no longer what he had been before. Although he was still called the leader of the Muslim League, he no longer had anything to do with it. He had been very proud before and would get irritated if anyone so much as mentioned the congress. He felt it beneath his dignity to talk to a Hindu.

As soon as the Partition was announced, however, there was a change in his behaviour. With the creation of Pakistan, poor Naim Mian was suddenly terribly confused and started to avoid even the mention of the Muslim League and Pakistan. But, anyway, what he did in the end saved him. Before August was over, he went over to Pakistan. As they were leaving Qadirpur, he said, ‘We’re just going to Delhi,’ but about a fortnight later, the Subedar Sahib received a letter from him from Lahore. He had written: ‘All the higher-ups I met in Delhi told me that the lives and fortunes of Muslims are no longer safe in India, and that we must go to Pakistan. We had a very hard time getting here, but, thanks be to God, we reached our country safe and sound. Azhar Mian has got a job in the Rehabilitation Department. God willing, Owais Mian will also find a job soon. There’s nothing left there now in Qadirpur. You should try to
come too. By God’s grace, I have some influence here, and we can work something out.’

When Pichwa heard the contents of the letter at Allah Razi’s store, he stood up and cursed Naim Mian. But what good was it to beat the trail when the snake had already slunk away? Perhaps Naim Mian would have lingered on a few more days, but, in fact, it had been Pichwa himself who had hastened his departure. Although Naim Mian had explained the situation over and over to him, once he had taken it into his head, he had to go and put his flag on the peepul tree. Although the invasion would eventually have taken place, initially the Jats had hesitated because of Pichwa. But this action of his was especially provoking, and, as the Jats acted on the principle of not putting off for tomorrow what could be done today, they attacked Qadirpur. Now it is true that Pichwa’s companions had beaten the hell out of the Jats in the fight, but Naim Mian was not so stupid that he could not see what was brewing. He knew that the calamity had been averted – but only for a while.

Panic broke out in Qadirpur as a result of Naim Mian’s letter. Three days later Munshi Sanaullah left for good. On market day that week people found attractive bargains in household goods at the second-hand dealer’s shop. Especially noticeable were Saiyid Hamid Hasan’s Nainital walking sticks, Qurban Ali Shisham wood cots, and Mushi Sanaullah’s china.
How could I have known several months ago when I started writing this story that it would be ruined? If I had, I would have finished it immediately. As I wrote the story, I began to realize that the character of Pichwa could not be contained in a short story. Justice could only be done to him in a full-length novel. Moreover, I thought, no epic poem has yet been written on the riots. Now, I am no poet – so let me try writing a prose epic. And then, this is not the time for writing great poetry. Now, when we have no great epic heroes, I am surely very fortunate to have a character like Pichwa fall right into my lap. But how could I have known then that after the first riot was over, another would break out and Pichwa would come to Pakistan? How could Pichwa, who confronted the rioters with his own body, have staggered and been pushed out? What terrible thing happened to Qadirpur? Where did Kalwa and Mammad drift off to? I have no idea. How could I have had the nerve to ask Pichwa about all this? I’m just sorry that the design of my novel is ruined. Pichwa and I are both unlucky. He was not fortunate enough to become the hero of an epic, and I am fated to treat the lives of insignificant people in worthless two-penny stories. People may look down their noses at this. It’s true that Pichwa wasn’t a great general or a splendid and glorious king; nevertheless, he had a certain dignity and greatness. And I never said my novel had to be called a Shah
Nama. An epic can also be called Jumhurnama. Anyway, there’s no use discussing it; it’s all just a thought now.

7 April 1950

I can’t figure out how to write about living things. I write about dead things. There’s certain amount of definiteness about them. They don’t have hidden corners and evocative shadows. How can one possibly write about living things? You can write reportage or political poetry about living things, but not short stories or lyric poetry. I feel very nervous when I see living things. The critic who said that a writer should always keep a window open while writing is a fool. Who says you should keep a window open during a windstorm? I’m just amazed at how people can write with their eyes open. I have to write with my eyes closed. I take up the pen only after the subject comes to permeate my mind totally. The trouble is, though, as long as I can still see it, it doesn’t settle down in my mind. As long as I lived in Qadirpur, it never occurred to me that Pichwa had it in him to become the subject of a story. When I came to Pakistan, my ties with Qadirpur were broken, and its life and people became a story for me. I didn’t care whether Pichwa was alive or dead. As far as I was concerned, he was dead. Out of sight, out of mind. I started to write thinking that he was dead, but here he is, a living, breathing picture, moving around in front of me, and consequently, the character that had settled down in my mind
has vanished like horns off a donkey’s head. Down with real life: it’s stolen from me the hero of my novel.

12 April 1950

Day and night I’ve been haunted by the question of whether or not I should write my novel. Sometimes I decide to start writing. After all, people do write about living subjects. Everyone is naked in his bath; if I take off my clothes, will a riot break out? Still, I just go on thinking. My head is with me, but my heart is on strike. To hell with writing – the character I had constructed with so much care and difficulty is no longer intact, to say nothing of the living personality. In Qadirpur, Pichwa’s living personality looked more like a character in a short story, but now that he’s come to Pakistan, newer facets to his personality keep unfolding every day. I thought of Pichwa as experiencing unrequited love, and this is the way I imagined the hero of my novel. Now more than unrequited love, he’s experiencing an unrequited desire for employment. When I met Pichwa this morning, he said, ‘Mian, get me some kind of work. I have no damned place even to put my feet on. Babu, if I can’t get any work, at least have a house allotted for me.’

I was greatly astonished when I heard these words from Pichwa’s mouth. He was never worried about daily necessities in Qadirpur. Here he begs for food and wants a roof over his head. Where and how can I get him a house and job? All I can do is make him the hero of my novel. Originally I thought I would
cast him as a twentieth-century Tipu Sultan, but now that he’s come to Pakistan and wants a place and something to fill his belly, all the stature and grandeur of his character are gone.

Pichwa is wandering around looking for work. Today he went to see Naim Mian about this problem, but Naim Mian is scarcely the Naim Mian he used to be – now he won’t give time to a small fry. He scolded Pichwa, ‘Everyone just comes to Pakistan expecting to get something, as if his old man had buried a treasure here. They just don’t realize that there isn’t that much room in Pakistan.’

Pichwa complaints that Naim Mian has put on airs now that he’s come to Pakistan. What’s he complaining about? Naim Mian is at the top of the heap – if he can’t boast, who can? Obviously, in Qadirpur, Pichwa would never have stood for such harsh words, nor would Naim Mian have had the nerve to address Pichwa thus. He was always tongue-tied in front of Pichwa. In its own home, however, even an ant becomes a tiger. Clearly, Pakistan is Naim Mian’s home and not Pichwa’s.

You can’t teach an old dog new tricks. Pichwa may have lost everything he had but he still has his flights of fancy. Even in his unrequited desire for work, he looks like he’s feeling unrequited love. His eyes burst out of his head when he saw the farmland of Pakistan. He told me, ‘Mian, if I could just get a bigha of land, what a change you’d see in Pichw. Now, I’d put in a mango grove and I’d
have a wrestling arena dug on one side where we’d have tests of strength. If you came here in the rainy season, Mian, I’d give you such mangoes that you’d forget Malihabaad.’

I answered, ‘Look, you daydreaming fool, who’s going to give you a bigha of land? This land doesn’t belong to you or me – it belongs to the zamindars.’

But when Pichwa is caught up in what he’s saying, his feet don’t stay on the ground. He answered, ‘the zamindars, too, are our Muslim brothers. You just watch: whoever I’ll beseech in the name of Allay and the Prophet Muhammad will not hesitate to give me a crumb of land.’

You see Pichwa’s strange logic – zamindars too must start being Hindus and Muslims.

22 April 1950

I feel as if the desire to create is decreasing in me. Sometimes I blame myself for this and sometimes, external events. Every time I take up my pen, the slogan ‘Long Live Pakistan’ goes up with such force that I drop the pen. The cry goes up everywhere for ‘constructive literature’. I can’t hear anything else in this noise. What is this animal called ‘constructive literature’? Things are recognized by their opposites. I’ve never yet seen anything destructive in literature. If literature isn’t destructive, how can it be constructive? Literature is neither constructive nor destructive; it’s just literature. After one of my
friends had gone on and on about constructive literature, I was just broiling, and I said in no uncertain terms that I wanted to write about homosexual love. He was incensed and said, ‘That’s a very sick love.’

‘Okay, you give me a healthy subject, then,’ I replied angrily.

‘Write about Pakistan,’ he said.

I can’t figure out what I should write about Pakistan or how I should write it. Pakistan is a living reality, a fact – and I don’t have the power to turn fact into fiction. Pakistan is a reality, while Qadirpur has become a story, a story I can tell. I don’t have the power to paint the land of Pakistan, but Qadirpur doesn’t need to be painted; it’s a story in itself. Its earth is reddened with the blood of its devoted sons. The reddened earth there, the air full of cries for help, the charred houses, the demolished mosque, the ruined wrestling arena – all these things tell a story eight hundred years old. I can tell this story with all the pain and sorrow that’s in it, and I can describe with full feeling the deed of the vanquished Arjun of this Mahabharata, but this Arjun – he’s the real problem now. How can I write the Mahabharata of Qadirpur? The Arjun of this Mahabharata is now a picture of failure and he wanders around the streets and lanes of Pakistan looking for a house and a job. He doesn’t get these two things and he continues falling from his true place.
2 May 1950

‘Mian, what kind of order is this?’ Pichwa was becoming ferocious, and I was afraid he would bite me. I shuddered. Then I remembered that this wasn’t Qadirpur but Pakistan, and that Pichwa didn’t have the same power here.

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I didn’t know what to tell him. I calmed him down with difficulty, explaining, ‘Bhai, let go of your anger. It’s just that Pakistan is full to the rafters now. Where will these new refugees fit? Moreover, some higher-ups went to Delhi and they say all the Muslims in India are doing fine.’

This incensed Pichwa even more. ‘Mian, would I lie to you, I, who’ve come from Qadirpur?’

I know Pichwa is not a liar. He may have a thousand faults, but lying isn’t one of them. So what if I know that the world believes only what the big shots say.
How the land shrinks, how food becomes scarce – the reason is simple enough but I can’t help it if Pichwa is too thick-skulled to understand it. They say there was once a king. He went a great distance hunting. He began to pant, and his throat was parched. Then he saw an orchard. He stopped in the garden to catch his breath and asked the gardener for water. The gardener’s daughter picked a pomegranate and brought it to him. She squeezed half of it into a glass, and the glass was full to the brim. The king drank the pomegranate juice and was refreshed. Then he set off again to hunt. On the way he thought, ‘Not only are so many pomegranates produced in this orchard, but only half a fruit fills a glass. Why not tax them?’

By and by the king came back to this orchard and asked the gardener for water. The gardener’s daughter squeezed a whole pomegranate into a glass, and then another, but still the glass did not fill up. She involuntarily cried out, ‘Father, our king intends evil!’

Surprised, the king asked, ‘Just how do you know the king intends evil?’

The gardener replied, ‘Maharaj, when the king intends evil the crops begin to fail.’
You don’t need a great brain to understand a simple thing like this. Both the ignorant gardener and his daughter understood it, but Pichwa – his head is full of cow dung.

Pichwa says, ‘Mian, make me the king of Pakistan for just one day and then I’ll show you how I make those friends who own lots of land, big houses and several factories jump up and down. I’ll beat them black and blue and give a share of their wealth to every one of the refugees.’ Snapping his fingers, he says, ‘Look, Mian, I’ll take care of everything just like that.’

But I don’t believe him – he’s always boasting. What he doesn’t seem to understand is that if he were made king of Pakistan, he too would change. The only people with a sense of responsibility are those without it. It is too many responsibilities that produce what is called irresponsibility. It’s not the person who is irresponsible but the chair he occupies.

5 May 1950

The farther I run from politics the more it pursues me. Until Pichwa came to Pakistan he was a genuine fictional character. But now that he’s here, he’s become an important political issue. Now whenever I think about him I end up in a political morass. Why isn’t he allotted a house? Why can’t he get a job?
Why is he being sent back to India? In short, I get caught in the maze of politics whenever I think about him. It’s not that I can’t talk about politics. I can say quite a lot about things like refugee rehabilitation, minority agreements, and abandoned property arrangements. Nor have I kept my mouth shut out of politeness. But why should I poke my nose into politics? Although I feel strongly that my creative talents are being ruined, that doesn’t mean I should hold my nose and dive into the cesspool of politics. A frustrated singer should stay a frustrated singer; he has no business becoming a recite of elegies. I wouldn’t interfere even if someone sprinkled this whole terrestrial ball with kerosene and set it on fire.

I’m afraid of external life, the most disgusting aspect of which is politics. Politics makes me tremble just as the butcher makes the cow tremble, and, in fact, politics brings the same doomsday for the writer as the butcher does for the cow. The joke is that politics not only slaughters both literature and the writer, it eventually gets all the plaudits as well.

6 May 1950

My creative desire continues to cool, and whatever magic there was in the fictional potential of Pichwa’s personality ebbs away. He no longer seems like a person at all; he seems more like a chess piece. First he’s in this square, then he goes to that one, then he’s shoved back again to the first one. The characters of a novel are supposed to be human beings – how can I make someone like him
the hero of my novel? If I really sweated and ground out a novel with chess pieces for characters, would anyone respect it? Could a novel about chess pieces be called anything but a chess game?

I thought it was just so much bravado, but he did really go back for good. What men call conscience is really a shameless thing. It never dies completely but remains half-dead or pretends to be dead, and can come to life any time at all. Pichwa asked me with some heat, ‘Will the leaders go with us too?’

I laughed and answered, ‘If they went, who would lead Pakistan?’

This made him angrier and he cursed Naim Mian roundly.

I told Pichwa to take it easy if he really had to leave and not do so in a hurry, that the government itself would take care of all the arrangements for the trip. This made him furious. ‘Should I take money for a shroud here and make my grave in India? I don’t want a charity shroud.’

8 May 1950

Pichwa’s departure has revived the plan for my novel. But who knows, he might suddenly come back and mess up the plan. Is it inconceivable that death might take him? After all, human life doesn’t endure for long. A person can die in a split second. It is entirely conceivable that the heat of Sind might finish off this man from the Doab, or that someone might throw him off the train, or that the train he’s riding in might be attacked. In short, death just needs an excuse.
What couldn’t happen if god willed it; and slaughtering people is certainly an
amusing sport, but . . . but why would He ride the horse at the bidding of
others?

It’s been nearly a fortnight since Pichwa left. I don’t know who else is left now
in Qadirpur, but I’ve heard that the Subedar Sahib is still hanging on there. I
fired off a letter to him but there’s no answer yet. I have no idea where Pichwa
ended up after gulping down the sands of Sind. I’d hesitate to say he even got
across the border. I wouldn’t be surprised if he took a liking to the dust of Sind.
Or perhaps the land of Pakistna was offended and hugged the departing guest to
her bosom. Isn’t it true that the earthly heart of a county throbs for its people
even if the hearts of fellow countrymen do not? Both this new country and its
uninvited guests are fantastic: the uninvited guests gripe about the indifference
of their former compatriots, the latter complain that the guest lack foresight and
have no feeling for the hosts’ difficulties. Regardless of whether there’s room
in the country, Pichwa left because there’s no longer any place in the hearts of
the people here. And Pichwa left defiantly. He said it was dishonourable to
stay any longer. Where has the truthful watchman of this false honour
wandered off to? I have no idea. How much he preferred individualism, too,
this person, how concerned he was about guarding his personal honour. I don’t
know if he was able to guard his personal honour or not. All I say is this: when
the whole nation is being disgraced does the honour of an individual count for anything? What difference does it make?

21 May 1950

I wait for the postman every day. I keep looking at the door. When he comes, he brings several letters at a time but not the one I’m waiting for. What’s happened to the Subedar Sahib that he doesn’t answer? Has he also passed away? A person’s breath is fragile to start with, and the Subedar Sahib had one foot in the grave even then. And what happened to that daring fellow Pichwa? Did the earth swallow him, or the sky devour him? Did the winds carry him off, or the snake bite him? Man is no more than a bubble, but proud Pichwa went to fight the wind with a lamp.

23 May 1950

Yeh daur-e jam, yeh gham-khana-e jahan, yeh raat

Kahan chiragh jalate hain loge, aye saqi

(This round of the cup, this sorrowful world, this night

Where do people light the lamp, O Cup-bearer?)

So that person has gone for good and not only that, he has ended up miles from Pakistan. He has crossed the borders of both Pakistan and India and has entered the country which isn’t marked by any borders, where countless refugees arrive
every day and are settled in no time at all. The Subedar Sahib’s letter – should I
call it a letter or an elegy – has come. I didn’t realize that the Subedar Sahib, in
between hunting geese and deer, would start writing elegies. He writes:

Your letter arrived late, but I am thankful it came. It was late in coming for two
reasons. First, because the address was written in a language that everyone else
here denies knowing, and second, because Qadirpur is no longer Qadirpur.
Now its new residents call it Jatunagar. You have fired off questions one after
another. Which ones should I answer and how? The times you talk about!
Where is Qadirpur now? As the poet says, *Ek dhup thi jo saath gai aftak ke!*
(The sunlight has vanished with the sun!)

Here, there is no longer a Tidda, nor an Allah Razi nor people flying their own
flag on the peepul tree by the Eidgah. When the land of Qadirpur became too
narrow for its people, some sank into it, and the rest were driven off. You ask
what condition the wrestling arena behind the Weavers’ Mosques would gladly
mourn the loss of their worshippers and the wrestling arenas the loss of their
young men- but where is there a mosque or an arena today? Allah Razi’s store?
Your asking brought it to mind – Hindu butchers sell jhatka meat there now.

Your country had no room for Pichwa, but the earth of his former country
clasped him to her bosom. I was not able to meet this fortunate person, but, yes,
one day the whole village got excited, and I saw on the same branch of the
peepul tree by the Eidgah, where Kalwa and Mammad had flown the flag of their party, their master's head was now hanging.

I felt very strange reading your letter. Whatever the reason, you remembered us. Do continue to remember us with scraps of letters. We are not strangers:

Wajah-ebegangi nahin ma’lum

Tum jahan ke ho wahan ke hum bhi hain

(Why do you think us strangers?)

We are from the same place as you are.)

I am getting old and pretty soon the lamp of my life will be snuffed out. Who will you write to then in Qadirpur? Do remember the two things I said about the address.

What a strange letter the Subedar Sahib has written. Is it a letter or the concluding sentences of some epic tale? I think I’ll end the novel I’m writing, my Qadirpur Mahabharata, with this letter. And what a death indeed this crazy Pichwa found! His life was a drama, and so was his death. The one undramatic event in his life was his flight to Pakistan. If only he hadn’t come to Pakistan. Pichwa disgraced himself by coming to Pakistan and threw a monkey wrench into the works of my novel.

25 May 1950
Pichwa is dead, but my novel is still not coming together. My hands start to shake whenever I take up my pen. Sometimes I feel as if I murdered Pichwa. What devil got into my head wanting him dead? If novels and stories got written this way, writers would be tried for murder every day.

27 May 1950

Every day I resolve to, but I haven’t started to write the novel yet. I pick up my pen and put it down again. I wonder why I’m writing this novel. People don’t care about human emotions here – the mention of human emotions is still an afterthought. Appreciation of literature comes from concern for humanity. My nation doesn’t value a human being; how can it care about literature? Why should I debase my creative talent and disgrace my pen?

I have definitely decided not to write my novel. But how long can I just sit at home and do nothing? I thought I ought to start moving around. I’m so disinclined to shocking people that I wouldn’t want to do anything spectacular. I would be content even to go into the despicable slave trade, but it’s not permitted privately now – the governments have taken it over. Naim Mian says if it hadn’t taken me such a long time to come to my senses, he would have had some big factory allotted to me. Now he has promised to have a flour mill allotted. I have to work somehow – if not a factory, let it be a flour mill.

29 May 1950
Naim Mian has sure turned out to be a useful person to have around. Somehow he had a flour mill allotted to me. As the owner of a flour mill, I see a strange kind of change in myself. As long as I was stuck in the web of literature would have meant being neither here nor there: I wouldn’t have written the novel, nor could I have done any other kind of work. Now, however, I consider myself a responsible citizen – a dutiful member of a rising nation.

1 June 1950

I’m writing in my diary for the last time today. From tomorrow I won’t have enough time for it. Keeping a diary is something you do when you’re unemployed. The arrangements for the mill have been taken care of. God willing, it will start up tomorrow. Since the going price in the city for grinding flour is five paise for five sers, I think at my place I will charge only four paise so that people will patronize the new mill right away.

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Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon
