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Tariq Mehmood's *Song of Gulzarina*
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A novel centred on a Pakistani immigrant's plan to commit a suicide bombing in Manchester, England, in the wake of the War on Afghanistan, can easily be read as a familiar post-9/11 tragedy. We can assume it is a story of radicalisation, where a character reaches his breaking point in response to a series of unfortunate and unjust geopolitical events. On the outset, then, Tariq Mehmood's *Song of Gulzarina* may seem like a predictable political commentary-cum-fable warning against the constraints of ideology and the violence of imperialism. However, it is both the author's and the characters' acute self-awareness of the familiarity of the plot, and their insistence on stressing the nuances of Saleem's journey rather than the gravity of its end, that make for a compelling read.

To say that Saleem's life is calamitous would be an understatement. The novel switches between his present day preparations for his suicide and flashbacks of how his life brought him to this decision. We witness Saleem's migration as an upper-caste schoolteacher from a village in Pakistan to England as a working class immigrant. Mehmood uses his protagonist's reflections on his past to weave an engaging historical and political backdrop into the story. Through Saleem's journey, the reader bears witness to the tragedy and violence of several historical moments, including the Partition of India and the establishment of Pakistan (and then, Bangladesh), reactionary racism against the steady stream of immigrants in 1960's England, the havoc wreaked by the Cold War in Afghanistan, and then again by the War on Terror, and the growing Islamophobia and decaying promises of multiculturalism in post-9/11 England.

Though these historical backdrops drive the story to an extent, they certainly do not control it. Mehmood avoids the pitfall of writing one-dimensional victims to the injustices of history and politics for the sake of commentary. Instead, his characters are flawed people in an unforgiving world, constantly wrestling with their own and each others' shortcomings, desperately trying to cling to their agency despite the inextricably personal and political tragedies unfolding beyond their control.

This sensitivity to fleshing out the characters' motivations and personalities is imbued throughout the novel. The irony of an atheist Pakistani man in his seventies on a personal suicide bombing mission is not lost on the reader, least of all the protagonist himself. Saleem is neither blindly ideological, nor vengefully self-destructive. Instead, he is frustratingly indecisive; his personality a manifestation of diasporic estrangement and ambivalence. He often becomes immobile when confronted with a decision, much to the exasperation of himself and those around him.

This tendency is encapsulated in a telling near-death encounter Saleem experiences when him and his cousin Habib's business obligations rope them into accompanying a group of US-backed mujahedeen across the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. On their way, the mujahedeen engage in a fight with a camp of Soviet soldiers in the Afghan mountains, and Saleem is wholly unprepared for the situation. When a Russian missile charges towards him he becomes completely paralysed, and Habib has to intervene to save his life. In the immediate aftermath Saleem shamefully thanks his cousin: "You are so brave," I said. "Not like me" (117). This exchange is an extreme embodiment of several similar encounters Saleem has with those close to him, where he is either physically or emotionally overwhelmed to the point of inaction, and must then bear witness

to the consequences of his (in)decisions on those around him. His indecisiveness, and indeed, Saleem's own admission to his cowardice, is a recurrent point of frustration and helpless embarrassment with himself.

It is through these details that Mehmood is able to craft the story of a character who is not just a victim of the events unfolding around him, but is also a victim of himself. Habib's reply to Saleem's gratitude, "Cousin, you westerners are not meant to die in this war" (117), demonstrates that, try as he might to resist, Saleem has become the stereotype of an *abroadi* unable to survive on his own "back home." The exasperation of living an all too familiar narrative, and the mostly futile attempts to resist becoming a stereotype, plagues the other characters in the novel as well, particularly the women in Saleem's life.

Early on in the book, the reader is introduced to the three main women in Saleem's life: his wife, Yasmin, his daughter, Aisha, and his lover, Carol. Here as well, Mehmood's story takes a familiar turn of an immigrant man who is bounded by duty to his wife from back home, while in love with a "Western" woman that he cannot bring himself to commit to. Rather than choosing complete loyalty or subversion to this archetype, Mehmood instead opts for nuance by writing subtle but developed supporting characters. Yasmin and Carol are all too aware of the familiarity of the narrative they are being subjected to, and the caustic dialogue and justifiable resentment simmering within both women shows their resistance, albeit through largely unfruitful attempts, to becoming living stereotypes.

Both women repeatedly confront Saleem for his *abroadi* hypocrisy and his inability to fully commit to either. However, Mehmood's sensitivity to the way power permeates the relationships between the characters avoids turning them into limited "women scorned" archetypes. Yasmin's bitterness towards Saleem's infidelity and abandonment is not just a matter of love. Mehmood shows the reader what is at stake for Yasmin: as a lower caste woman, Saleem's broken promise of not becoming "like other village men who go to *Valait*, Britain... [and] can't resist white flesh" (11) puts her at risk of ostracism and violence, a sombre reality even Saleem cannot deny.

Carol is similarly aware of the role of the *goree* mistress she finds herself playing. In a confrontation with Saleem, she knowingly mocks him: "So you think I wouldn't understand, eh? So you think your white bit doesn't understand you lot only do girlfriends, eh? Just fuck us and marry your village virgins. Isn't that it?" (56). It is Carol's familiarity with and disdain for the stereotype both her and Saleem are living, and her inability to withdraw despite her better judgement, that make the unfolding of their relationship all the more painful. The reader bears witness to the characters' anger at both the reality and the seemingly inescapable nature of their misfortune, be they inflicted by each other or by larger social and political forces. It is this miserable self-awareness of his characters that make Mehmood's story a refreshing take on a familiar narrative.

Reading *Song of Gulzarina* as a calamitous tale of vengeance would be an easy interpretation, but it would not do the novel justice. Saleem is advised against his planned suicide bombing by an acquaintance who once similarly sought retribution: "But that peace only lasted the night of my sleep, the pain never stopped in the day. Your pain will never go, no matter what you do" (212). Later in his life, during a tense conversation with his estranged daughter, Saleem echoes this advice to her: "There is us and our past, daughter. This

pain will just keep us here" (194). Saleem understands the futility of vengeance for a tragedy-ridden past, yet he still continues to plan the suicide bombing. Saleem's mission, then, can be simultaneously understood as a broken man's final attempt to violently confront the systems that have failed him, and a regretful man's hopeful attempt at redemption for his shortcomings by orchestrating his own end.