

Chhinaal

Fallen Venus

 abir, the spoilt scion of a wealthy family, first saw her at a friend's wedding. Agra's Gauhar Jaan was to perform the *mujra*, a common rite of celebration and a testimony to grandeur in stately homes. The poetic bows, tinkling of anklets, twirls against golden drapes were seals of splendour.

For days on end, a battle raged in his mind. 'How can I lose my heart to a nautch girl who serves hearts and bodies? How?'

'This Agra girl, my God, she has my heart in a knot,' he would say to his friend Anwer over and over again.

Finally, Anwer took him for a round of the brothel. A perfect setting where literary descriptions of nautch abodes

came alive – a madame, a tutor, musicians, seated on ivory sheets, against plush, velvet bolsters.

Gauhar Jaan, a vision, of exquisiteness and conceit, knew the art of seduction. She teasingly slipped out of his gaze and walked over to the jeweller waiting with all his gems on exhibit. She picked up pieces with disdain and put them aside as if they were acerbic fruit, until her interest lingered on a ring.

‘Dear, I have had it with your whining for a ring. Do you like this one? Take it,’ said the madame, Baiji, giving her prized patron Akbar Seth an indulgent glance.

‘Take it. Only diamonds for these fingers,’ Seth encouraged.

‘I am not so worthy,’ sighed Jaan with rehearsed innocence.

‘My dear, a thousand rupees are mere pittance compared to your worth. Take it.’

In no time, the jeweller had spread out all his rings before Jaan, each of which cost twelve thousand rupees. They glittered like stardust as she tried them on, fitting her as if crafted especially for her fingers.

Seth flung his visiting card at the gemsman. ‘Take my name and collect your money from my shop.’

A little later, a fawning audience settled in, the lights dimmed and she appeared behind a tissue curtain. Gauhar bowed in an *adaab* and the luminous spray of her rings shone through the curtain. Sabir sat intoxicated by her beauty.

‘Worlds separate us. I must search for love at another threshold, alas,’ said Sabir’s heart. But he had no say over it.

Anwer interrupted his reverie. ‘Prostitutes have the same eyes for everyone, but they don’t fall in love. Money is their religion. Why get caught in this deception? You can never tell how the one you celebrate as yours sees other men.’

Jaan’s coy ways and muted guile were etched in Sabir’s heart. Early the next day, he left for her brothel on his own, and was the first to arrive there. She sat resplendently on a spread with gold star trails. The red drapes in the room were still in their covers. He took his place a little away from her.

‘Ah, they are blessed,’ he gushed, looking at her slippers.

Fazed by his brash remark, Gauhar Jaan receded. ‘You are so brazen.’

Her displeasure stole his breath. ‘As bashful as women in noble homes... she has all the ornaments of a chaste woman,’ he thought.

And then he moved closer. ‘For God’s sake, don’t try me so much.’

‘Why do you make claims you cannot stand by? Will *huzoor* really die?’

‘Am I alive to you?’

She let out a laugh that fell on him like lightning, a laugh that could set lush fields on fire if it came from the firmament.

‘You laugh? Am I a liar?’

‘Look under your collar, search within.’

‘Let me look under yours. There isn’t much under mine,’ Sabir said mischievously. She blushed and covered her face. ‘God! You are so shameless. Who says such things?’

Her demure ways held his universe. Their few trysts became the centre of his existence, the last of which consumed him like an inferno. But Anwer and other friends still saw his love as a fleeting fascination and spoke about her with disdain. They told him that quiet wives destroyed more homes than shameless whores ever did.

‘No, she is for the home. How did she ever get caught in this ghastly trade!’ was his constant protest.

Every year, a celebration at his friend’s lavish home had a courtesan as its centre piece. This time, the invite carried Gauhar Jaan’s name. Sabir watched her till dawn, fixated on her with an eagle’s gaze. She pushed the harmonium aside as the muezzin cleared his throat for the call to prayer at sunrise. Some, devoured by the nightlong vigil, collapsed at the host’s, others dragged themselves homewards. Musicians stretched like sleepy stray dogs on mattresses covered in white with rows of pillows arranged on them.

Sabir found a place by Gauhar Jaan’s feet. He’d only slept a few hours when cold hands pressed against his soles. ‘A muslin shirt and bare feet? Such sleep is dangerous,’ her syrupy voice poured into his ears. He lay there quietly as she wrapped his cold feet in her shawl.

Could his tumultuous heart wield such power that

her heartbeat was now in sync with his? Sabir's mind was inundated with questions and thoughts of his mother, who was an unyielding ritualist. She prayed five times a day, observed fasts, and went into seclusion during Ramzan.

'I always say, a whore, like chickenpox, cannot stay inside the house,' roared Amma Bi, when he got home and stated his intention to marry Gauhar Jaan. She slammed her *paandaan*, kicked the *paan* basket and glared at Sabir with incensed eyes. The hang of his face made him a portrait of abject anguish.

'After all, this is a tainted woman from a brothel. Her kind cut and run within seconds. If you send someone to check her room, it will take her only minutes to clean it out and escape with another customer!'

'Amma...' His sister Zehra feebly attempted to stop her from talking further.

'Unimaginable. A cheap slut in this home? They destroy homes, how can she nurture one? My Sabir could only find a hooker,' his mother lamented.

In that moment, if someone slashed Sabir open, his veins would run dry. He still tried to stir the staunch believer in her. 'Amma, the one who asks for forgiveness is as pure and sinless as a newborn. If she wants to discard a life of deceit and riches, is God not leading her out of sin? If He wants to rescue her, do you want to disobey Him?'

'Son, feet that know the thrills of a *mujra* cannot be still within the four walls of a home. How can a woman who

has seen countless men, be satisfied by just one? I know. A whore, like chickenpox, cannot be contained.’ Amma Bi was merciless.

Finally, the headstrong Sabir gave up all thought of coaxing his stubborn mother and decided to take on his family and their Syed community.

He was Amma’s sole heir; Zehra was to be married in a few months. The thought of losing her son haunted Amma Bi. Whether it would be to poison or to Gauhar Jaan, however, was in her hands. So, Amma Bi relented. Gauhar Jaan crossed their threshold as Dulhan Begum and Zehra welcomed her with all the warmth and joy. But Amma was determined to char her happiness with ridicule. ‘A whore, like chickenpox, doesn’t stay inside.’

‘Please, Amma, don’t do this now.’

‘If an unsullied woman is a *shareefzadi*, then why give another name to a harlot?’ she bit back.

The next morning, Dulhan woke before sunrise to the sounds of Amma’s ablutions, coughing, her loud recital of scriptures and Zehra’s holy rituals. Sabir, satiated after a night of flaming passion and alcohol, was deep in sleep.

‘Oh Lord, have I come to my husband’s home or to a mosque?’ was her first thought at the first light of her new life. She took a stroll in her elaborate bedroom and its marble terrace. Blooms of all shades lined the ledges, with a seating arrangement on the side. Her rebirth sank in and she smiled.

Dulhan gave Sabir a gentle nudge. ‘*Huzoor*, wake up.’ Her own words startled her. These were terms of her old home. Her language, like her, had to transform. ‘Listen, time to wake up. Don’t you have to make a living?’ she tried again.

After breakfast, Gauhar and Zehra skipped up the stairs to the roof to dry their long hair. On the opposite roof, their neighbour sat with a book. He recognized Dulhan Begum from a *mujra* gathering and scanned her like a searchlight, then whistled. Begum raised her head and he flirted with a snigger. ‘Darling, what brought you to this roof? Your wet hair? I have ample muscle and money. Why not my house?’

Discomfort turned Zehra to stone. Dulhan felt her skin melt away. She pulled Zehra aside and said, ‘We will not come here again. They are an indecent lot.’ As the two rushed down, he yelled, ‘You are as used as the flaccid remains of a flower. My queen, let me get to know this fresh bud.’

Dulhan ran to her room and dove onto her bed in tears. ‘I should not be here. I am not worthy. My presence can cast a dark shadow on your life, Bibi.’

‘Bhabi, don’t say that.’ Zehra placed her hand on Dulhan’s lips. ‘They are the scum of our neighbourhood. We don’t meet them. The other neighbours are more supportive and affectionate than our relatives,’ she placated her sister-in-law.

‘You will not understand. I know. Even if my infamy doesn’t stalk me, my misfortune is mine, like my shadow,’ Dulhan wept.

‘Please stop, Bhabi, or I will cry with you.’

Days went by. Dulhan basked in Sabir’s love despite Amma Bi’s lacerating silence. But their long, lustful hours in their room were often broken by her thoughts. She felt the matriarch’s eyes on their door burn holes in her. The grand dame had not shared the dining table with her even once after their marriage. Meanwhile, Zehra spent her days in school and Dulhan immersed herself in household chores, occasionally sending Sabir on mundane errands.

Zehra’s routine dash for the stairs as soon as she returned from school sparked Amma’s usual tirade against Sabir. ‘You have ruined your life. You had no concern for your sister. She spends her time with your whore. I never let her go to the roof. Now she is there with that streetwalker.’

Dulhan was always bewildered by the blame. ‘Why is the onus on me? Zehra is never with me.’

One afternoon at lunch, Sabir said he would return late that night because of an office meeting. After dusk, Zehra pranced into Dulhan’s room. ‘My lovely Bhabi, please let me wear your sari with black and green flowers.’

‘You don’t have to ask. My belongings are yours.’

Everyone ate dinner, but Dulhan stayed hungry, waiting for her husband. As the house grew warm, she moved to the roof, where she sensed a strange indulgence in the air. It hung like a winding sheet. Then, rushed movements and slow whispers rose from behind the water tank on the notorious neighbour’s roof.

‘How did you make it today?’

‘My brother will be late.’

‘And if he is early...?’

‘I am not so innocent. I have his wife’s sari. If Amma or he catch a glimpse, they will think it’s Bhabi. Her being a prostitute is rather good for us.’

‘But I want to make love, I am serious. I can’t take these furtive meetings any more. Now let me!’

‘We will. Thanks to her sari.’

‘Don’t toy with me.’

‘I want it too.’

‘Wonderful that your brother brought a prostitute home. We can ravage each other till your wedding and then when you visit.’

In that instant, Gauhar knew she had been born twice. In her first birth, she was the most precious commodity of a brothel. In her second, she was to return to it. In between, she unhinged her heart. She made a quiet return to her room.

Dear Zehra,

Please tear this letter after you read it.

May God keep you happy and on the righteous path. You are engaged and I wish you a happy marriage soon.

I have understood your love for my saris. My life is behind me. It passed the way it was meant to. However, as your brother’s wife, the days of honour spent in this

home make it my duty to guide you and stop you from straying. What really is the value of a whore? My infamy, like an old, loyal maid, will never leave me. But I will not stand witness to you tainting your character.

Dear child, if you use my clothing, it is my clothing that will get sullied as it has in the past. But, all the holy water will fail to wash away the stains on the fabric of your life. Tread the pious path ordained by your faith and home. This is my advice and prayer for you.

I came to this house with my head lowered to this house. Ever since, only Sabir's body, the wind, the rays of the sun and moonbeams have touched my body. As I leave, every fragment of my being will bear the imprints of your brother's incomparable love. Once again, I leave this pure love with a lowered head, so you can stand tall for the rest of your life.

Your Bhabi.



'I always said a whore, like chickenpox, can never stay inside.' Amma slammed her *paandaan*, kicked her basket of *paan* aside, and pinned Sabir with a knowing look. 'A whore stayed a whore. Did she not?'