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A Loveless Landscape

Uljhan bhi hoon teri, uljhan ka hal bhi hoon main
(*I am your problem. But I am also your problem's solution.*)

—Zero (2018)

Imagine an expedition. We are a team of explorers, journeying deep into the inner monologue of a heartbroken woman, the subterranean conversation she conducts with herself. The landscape of romantic bereavement is hardly alien to any of us, full of familiar sights and sounds. On the surface, our subject is cool, perhaps even flippant. But we hear her private thoughts, we see her grapple with the aftermath of loss. She is nursing a broken heart and an injured spirit. We decide against dismissing her heartache as banal. Our expedition starts surveying the pictures she draws; we become students of the stories she tells herself.

As we step into her mindscape, we begin to understand how she sees the world. She likes her job. Her professional life elicits a fierce loyalty. She feels a warm attachment towards clients and colleagues who've helped her survive and succeed. We sense deep gratitude for champions and mentors who have guided her through office life, its

hierarchies and casual politics. She is proud of her achievements as a working professional of some import and value to her workplace. That pride—of being visible and valued in a system designed to sideline her, to render her voiceless—offers a reservoir of worth and meaning.

She has just had an important week at work—a project she had helmed was released successfully into the world. We might expect her to be thrilled by this triumph. Instead, as we rummage about in her thoughts, we find that she is queasy, berating herself for her inadequacy. She is preoccupied with the sudden and surprising death of a long-distance romance. The joy of making a productive contribution to the world seems completely obliterated by the sting of romantic rejection. She had gradually revealed herself to this man, and felt he did the same. They were building an intimacy, paying attention to the humdrum matters in each other's lives. There was such a charge between them, it electrified dinner tables. Sadly, pragmatism plundered all prospects of emotional exploration and discovery. Distance, respective life goals, many sensible motifs were invoked. Six hours before she boarded a flight from New York to London, en route to New Delhi, he had subjected her to the tired platitude of 'it's not you, it's me'.

Sprawled on a hotel bed, she reminds herself that this connection was never expected to evolve into marriage or a lasting commitment. The logistics of the affair were impossible to begin with—an Indian woman with a rewarding career in New Delhi dating a white Western man in the midst of an equally rewarding career in New York. Despite the odds stacked against them, she had never expected that the end would be so brutal, that his attitude would be so utterly cavalier. Weeping would help, but her body won't oblige. She clings to the hotel linen, unable to physically manifest her pain through tears. We listen closely: she isn't grieving the demise of her quasi-relationship as much as how it ended without exacting any visible emotional toll on her ex.

We hear her ego whine and wail. *He was so nonchalant and inarticulate. The sex and continuous conversation must have meant very little to him, I must have misread the depth of our relationship. Was the sex bad? I don't remember it ever being bad for him. He never took me very seriously. If he really cared an iota about me or what I think of him, he wouldn't do this a few hours before I boarded a flight. He would have ended it properly. Instead, he looked like he had been sleepwalking through our entire affair. When I said we were wasting our connection, he suggested we have dinner the next time I visit New York. Dinner!*

The hotel reception interrupts her angry ballad, informing her that an airport pick-up will arrive shortly. She stares at the room, memorizing all its details, like a detective investigating a crime scene. She has been the victim of a brutal emotional crime, she tells herself. The forensics suggest otherwise.

Wordless, her mind meditates on images. She recalls how they had entered the hotel room. She'd expected pre-departure sex. Instead, he said he didn't want this, didn't want her anymore. Initially, he complained about the distance. After a few half-formed sentences, he changed his plan of attack. He muttered something incoherent about the need to 'figure out his life'. He claimed to be a 'complicated person'. Recollecting the scene, she laughs out loud. He isn't all *that* complicated, we hear her say.

She knows his kind. He is a prototype of the Western cognitive universe, where calibrated composure is strictly preferred to any display of vulnerability. A man of tremendous promise and perfection, collapsing under the weight of his own potential. A simple and decent man, his love life is steeped in the robotic rituals of serial monogamy. A man who has forged and forsaken intimacy so many times that he is inured to romantic aches and niggles. A man stuffed full of accolades, yet starving for meaning. A strategic man, his cold calculus of self-actualization has classified her as inconvenient and incompatible.

We fear she is an untrustworthy witness to her own victimhood. Her recollections bounce without a coherent sequence. All through the conversation, she had been distracted by a gaping hole in her stocking. *No wonder he left me; what kind of man desires a woman with faulty hosiery?* While concealing her stocking malfunction, she heard him say, 'Don't you ever feel like you just want to be alone?'

She had answered in the affirmative. But now, a few hours later, her heart dwells on the harsh unspoken truth: *He doesn't desire freedom from all humans, he desires independence from me, from our intimacy.* His quest for solitude feels like a scam. *Perhaps he's just not that into me,* she thinks. *Perhaps I'm just not that into myself.*

The quasi-ex had tried to pepper the conversation with praise, joking that he felt no need to 'butter her up'. Our team hears her struggle: *I am supposed to believe that I am terrific, although this man no longer desires to touch me. That I am so great, so damned terrific, that after weighing his options, he decided that he could easily do without talking to me ever again.* We notice that her raw feelings of rejection have no interest in considering the other's conflict or interiority.

She relentlessly replays their parting scene in her head. After an hour of listening to him make increasingly incoherent excuses, she had suggested he leave the hotel room. She remembers his response being a *khichdi* of boredom, guilt and relief. 'Are you sure? Is that what you want? What would you like? Some people want to talk, some people don't want to talk at all,' he had offered, as if he were a restaurant waiter reciting from a menu. *Madam, what kind of break-up would you prefer? Sunny side up or scrambled?* Scrambled.

When they started to exchange their final farewells, she drew on all her maturity and wished him the best. 'I'll miss you,' she said. He said nothing. All goodwill between them evaporated in that room, dried up by his lack of language and her expectation of an empathetic ending. We realize that no real crime has occurred here. Her break-up was so cliché, it would make clichés blush. One person unexpectedly

decided to jettison another without using too many words or without much affect. While the asymmetry of romantic power is unbearable, it is yet to be declared a criminal offence.

After clearing airport security, she dials her best friend and seeks counsel. 'If you expect a man to offer sensible words for a break-up, to show you how he actually feels, you're expecting too much. Anyway, nothing he says will ever make you feel better. Life is not like one of those ridiculous Hindi film romances you love, where Shah Rukh cries and always knows what a girl needs to hear and how to say it. In real life, men are sex-crazed robots who can barely express themselves. I'm sorry for what happened but it's probably for the best. Don't torture yourself with what he did or did not do,' her best friend says on the phone. But she is in no mood to absorb sensible advice. As she boards her flight, the sadness of separation gives way to humiliated rage. She sips her champagne, unable to cry, unable to sleep.

Our subject is not foolish enough to believe that she alone can see things as they are. She doesn't harbour hardened, cynical views on many things other than the chronic lovelessness that is the fate of successful women in her city. Her firm belief in the romantic inequality between men and women of privilege is unshakeable, frozen through years of experience. She thinks: *Have I manufactured my own romantic misery? Am I expecting Shah Rukh in real life? Am I implicated in this mess? All my relationships seem to follow a pattern—I choose to exclusively care for a man while he chooses to exclusively care for himself.*

She is so very afraid. Afraid that she is designed to prefer selfish men. Afraid that all her feminism, friendships, hard work, will, strength and success cannot shield her from the unequal markets of love. Guilty that she's not enlightened enough to reject the need for a pair-bond. Nervous that her quest for love is nothing but a quest to love the structures that oppress her. She feels a desperate need to howl and cry but her tear ducts are blocked by pride and rage. *How did I become this person?*

We hear her catalogue the unequal prospects for personal happiness between her and the men in her milieu. Her quasi-ex's life, an international one of acclaim, allows the confidence of knowing he'll always meet interesting and suitable people. He can casually let go of any romantic connection because the probability of finding a substitute is not scarce for him. She too, can play the field. Sadly, her field is not as open and unconstrained. Patriarchy, geography and her preference for handsome men who take an interest in their partner's career ensure that she will occupy the romantic doldrums of Delhi, where sex is plentiful, but chances of an authentic connection are rare and depleting.

But she refuses to bargain with her romantic expectations. *Maybe it is all those silly Shah Rukh films and interviews. I have mad standards, I am expecting a movie star in real life*, we hear her say to herself. The price she pays for these 'standards' are loneliness and some social discomfort. Her exes don't face such terrible odds in love, they'll do all right. No man in Delhi with the same attributes as her will face the same shallow pool of romantic options, and the resulting fears and predicaments. *If I were a man with the same job and degree, I would be swimming in a sea of dates and attention. But I am not a man.*

We watch her trying to fidget her way to freedom. As she speeds past immigration, she wonders: *Is struggling to find a boyfriend a suitable feminist grievance?*

A sense of shame accompanies her along the taxi ride from Heathrow to her London hotel. Somewhere between Hounslow and Central London, the chatty Moroccan driver asks if she is Indian. He asks if she knows Shah Rukh Khan.

Of course she knows Shah Rukh. She loves him. In fact, at this point, she's convinced that loving him is part of her problem. Her problem and her solution. A formative influence, Shah Rukh was the man who had fooled the child in her into giving primacy to romantic love. The taxi driver waxes lyrical about Shah Rukh's fanbase in North Africa

and the Middle East. ‘Even Nadia Murad is a fan, amazing lady, and Malala. Both Nobel Peace Prize winners. I saw that. You know them? You know that?’

He continues, ‘Don’t mind but I feel like I can talk to you about these things. Looks like Shah Rukh will have to move to Dubai soon. You’ve seen what’s happening in your country, right? I don’t understand it, but seems like they cut internet in the capital and want to kick Muslims out?’

‘It doesn’t sound good,’ she responds.

It’s January 2020, a month since several parts of India had erupted in protests over legislation that outlined a path towards citizenship for ‘illegal’ immigrants, as long as they were not Muslim. Students, artists and thousands of ordinary citizens took to the streets to defend India’s secular credentials and ethos. Her own friends, she knew, had joined the protests. Many were upset at icons like Shah Rukh for failing, for example, to publicly condemn the violence unleashed by police on students in Jamia Millia Islamia University, his own alma mater. Yet, all this talk of Shah Rukh and Indian current affairs don’t divert her. Instead, we see her withdrawing further into her own private heartache. She has no emotional energy to reckon with politics. *These are important fights. And here I am, with my self-indulgent first-world worries.*

The driver continues, oblivious to her reticence: ‘Let’s hope it all becomes all right soon. But if he wants, Shah Rukh can come to Morocco as well. We love him back home. I have some of his songs on my phone, shall I play them?’

She is quick to refuse. ‘I just had a bad break-up, I’m not really in the mood for Shah Rukh,’ she says. A silence falls in the cab. When they reach the hotel, the driver helps with her bags. He smiles and says, ‘It’ll be okay—you, Shah Rukh and the country. You’ll see. *Kabhi khushi, kabhi gham*; did I say that correctly?’

‘Yes, you did. Thank you.’

He was referring to Shah Rukh’s grand 2001 movie, the title of which translates roughly to ‘Sometimes Happiness, Sometimes Sorrow’. The mention of that film provokes some self-acceptance within her: *It is my time to be sad—no current affairs, no books, no feminist rhetoric or moving images of resistance can prevent the pain.* No matter how trivial, she starts to realize how the standard hetero game was failing her, how she was failing herself. At a time when several of her friends had sent her messages about how ‘Shah Rukh was failing the country with his silence’, she wonders: *Has Shah Rukh failed me? Did he deliver me to this loveless place?*

After a quick shower, with immense spiritual purpose, she walks to the Madame Tussauds wax museum to commune with the waxwork of Shah Rukh. Now, he stands in front of her. A wax composition of all her self-pity and personal failure. She takes a breath and talks to him.

It’s your fault. You’re probably like all the idiot men of Delhi yourself. But I’ve grown up watching you, listening to you. You with so many words, always emoting, always talking, so much said with your face. You with your teary eyes. I know it’s ‘acting’, that I am a fool to expect men in real life to be so emotionally literate. But I can’t give up the fantasy.

She prays to Shah Rukh for release from the torment of romantic failure. She is a fan, a new-age devotee. While people in her country may want the flesh-and-blood version of Shah Rukh to speak on their behalf, to echo their personal outrage with the political weight his voice carries, she simply wants this wax figure before her to ferry a metaphysical message up above. For the time being, this wax statue has acquired mystical properties. She believes it is her intermediary, her means of communication with the higher power responsible for arbitrating romantic justice in the world.

The complainant argues her case. She tells him that this break-up feels unfair, that she is struggling to remember that a man’s love is secondary to her life’s work. *Why aren’t family and friendship enough?*

Why doesn't my professional life make me as happy as my ex did? Why does a man's love matter so much? It's one thing to read, retweet and recite great feminists. It's quite another to live their lessons every day as a scared single woman in Delhi. I am sorry for being this self-obsessed when women in our country are protesting and struggling, but I can't deny my hurt. Where can I deposit it? Can you help me?

We watch her complaining morph into a fan prayer. She seeks his blessings and bursts into a fit of ugly crying in public. Now, the tears won't stop. She runs to her London hotel and cries the day away. We sense a transformation; her sadness has been cleansed of shame. On the second and final day of her London layover, the *Gully Boy* album is her companion for long walks in the city. She feels like a traitor, relying on Ranveer Singh as a soundtrack for her sadness. But it's impossible to listen to a Shah Rukh song and avoid another tearful scene outdoors.

On her flight to Delhi, she musters up the courage to invoke Shah Rukh through the miracle of aeroplane Wi-Fi. In a flash, he is on her mobile phone, offering quotes and wisdom, smiling and offering assurance, a picture of masculine vulnerability.

This time she cries herself to sleep.

Bleary-eyed, she lands at Delhi's Terminal 3 airport and gazes around at the humans collecting their luggage from the baggage carousel. She wonders if those near her need an icon to help them nurse failure or rejection. She wonders how they survive, where do they find diversion and comfort to tackle the emotional wounds modern life inflicts on all of us.

Our expedition continues. We study her thoughts till the middle of 2021. Through this time, a predictable recovery routine ensues, amidst the most unpredictable time in the world. She works through the multiple lockdowns. She argues about politics on her family WhatsApp groups. She tries to be productive, with intermittent periods of wallowing and weeping. At the peak of the second wave of

the pandemic, she helps strangers find hospital beds and vaccination slots. She loses loved ones and co-workers. Surrounded by news of death, she feels nostalgic for her time in that hotel room where our survey of her interior life began, for a time when romance was the sole cause of pain. Eventually, she realizes that the universe and her quasi-ex have done her a massive favour. They've conspired to ensure she avoids participating in an unhappy relationship with a man who withholds himself. She returns to Shah Rukh's films and interviews; her demand for care and connection are invigorated. And she continues her irrational quest through virtual dates. She is desperately seeking Shah Rukh, desperately seeking an escape from this landscape of endless romantic disappointment.

We walk away from our expedition, puzzled. The typical tropes of Bridget Jones, *Fleabag*, the women from *Sex and the City* and other modern cultural totems representing the angst of privileged thirty-something working women don't feature the female protagonist crying at a Bollywood actor's shrine. What's going on here?

Who is Shah Rukh? Why does she turn to him in her most desperate moments? What does the love of his icon say about the modernity of modern Indian women?

I'll start with the easiest question.