



## In Search of Imaginary Homelands

By Bhupinder Parihar

*Sleepwalkers*

by Joginder Paul

Translated from Urdu

By Sunil Trivedi & Sukreta Paul Kumar

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*Sleepwalkers (Khwab Rau)*, the Urdu novella by the distinguished fiction writer Joginder Paul was first published in 1991 by the Educational Publishing House, Delhi. Now it appears in English translation. In authentic translation, the book attempts to capture the predicament of the *mohajirs* who migrated from Lucknow to Karachi during the Partition. On their arrival in Karachi, they feel alien. Deep nostalgia starts eclipsing the reality of dislocation. The migrants miss Lucknow; its streets, chaste Urdu, superbly delicious mangoes, and the high culture Lucknow has been proverbially famous for. They find themselves existing between two imaginary homelands, between illusion and reality. As the novel progresses, we find the *mohajirs* wondering:

*Nazar ka dhoka nahin tha  
to phir aie shab-e daraz  
Woh halke halke  
subh ke aasaar kya huye?*

In the author's words:

On a visit to Karachi in mid eighties, I found I had come to a wonderland. All the people were walking, talking or whatever, in deep sleep. . . . As for the people - they spoke the chaste Urdu that reminds one of the pre-Partition days when it was spoken more for aesthetic pleasure than for communicating with people . . .

The author discovered Lucknow in Karachi, a surrogate Lucknow. The road, the chowk, the kababwalas, the hubbub appear to the author all "frozen in an embrace". The author raises the question - People ask, why did the *mohajirs* forsake their homes in India to migrate to Karachi? The answer comes—to avoid death and fire, to avoid communal clashes, to avoid disgrace, to replace Hindus in Pakistan who

migrated to India to avoid the same fate. Things do not end here perhaps. The *mohajirs* had asked for Pakistan, and had even shouted for it. The omniscient author is of the view that migration of the *mohajirs* was a "sacred refuge". He sums up his thesis in these words:

So, while, Mirasen is happy to have reached her Pakistan while still in India, Achhi Begum is apprehensive of a "Pakistani corridor" in her "Lucknow" in Karachi. The problem cannot, as we realize when we consider it in all its complexity, be resolved with a few impassioned strokes . . .

Sain Baba in *Sleepwalkers*, a native of Sindh runs from town to town in his own land, in search of Pakistan. The author has the shared reason to believe that "the problem is intricate enough and can be solved only with compassionate understanding".

The element of nostalgia embodied so powerfully in the character of Deewane Maulvi Sahab appears to be situated at 'the edge of existence.' When a sudden bomb takes away the lives of dear ones, he wakes up to the reality of his being in Karachi. It is a moment of both epiphany and subversion—an essential ingredient of Joginder Paul's fiction. A prototype of the first generation, Maulvi Sahab has deeply suffered the torments of *hijrat*. Ishaq Mirza, his younger son, is well aware of "the trick contemporary history has played with the *mohajirs*. He knows too well the reality of the myth of the Indian Lucknow in Karachi. He is of the firm opinion that the Lucknow of Karachi can never be dragged back to its Indian origin. The children who grow up here will have to suffer another *hijrat*". Ishaq Mirza tells his nieces: "Girls, we are all Pakistanis; because we are all inhabitants of the

ideology of Pakistan". The nieces ask with a sense of disbelief: " . . . inhabitants of the ideology?" To this, Ishaq Mirza's reply is: " Yes, just as we reside in our country, our country too dwells in our minds. If you don't believe me, satisfy yourself by tracing the lines of the idea of Pakistan. An exact and complete map of Pakistan will emerge". As the dialogue advances, conversation dwindles into inanities, and 'the ideology of Pakistan' finds its place in the dustbin of dry academics.

The difference between Deewane Maulvi Sahab and Joginder Paul, who too is a migrant, is "suffer I did no less than Deewane Maulvi Sahab, the suffering having driven the old man out of his wits, and me to an insane pursuit of premature sanity". For Joginder Paul, the fiction writer, "it is not always the same events but the same emotional impact of events that accounts for literary authenticity". As a savant of the migrant truth and experience, Joginder Paul, like E.M. Forster in *A Passage To India*, tells a story with nuances, presents naked truths with subterranean layers, indulges in authorial commentary and omniscient solipsism, employs interior monologue to lay bare the migrant psyche, and as a humanist attempts to resolve paradoxes.

The lyrical flow makes the novel read like a poem. It reminds the reader of Virginia Woolf's observation that a novel is a lyric, a poem, an elegy. The atmosphere of the mind is delineated with rare virtuosity. The existential aberrations, and fears of the unknown speak volumes of Joginder Paul's comprehensive grasp of a major human experience - the experience of the diaspora in search of social, political, moral, existentialist and cultural anchors. All this pulsates so vibrantly in Ishaq Mirza's musings:

My elder son will go to America to pursue his studies. He is not such a fool as to keep himself buried in books forever. Perhaps he'll fall in love with some junior librarian in his university and then perhaps they'll get married, whether we are able to participate in the wedding or not. . . . As a matter of fact I am only aware of my father's surname since it happens to be my surname too . . .

The *mohajir* elders grapple for anchors in their attempt to come to terms with their fate as *mohajirs*. These anchors become available to them only at the intellectual and philosophical level. As they seek an answer to the gnawing question- For how long shall we remain *mohajirs* - they tend to seek refuge in:

In truth, we are all *mohajirs*.

During the British Raj, our elders used to flaunt their ribbons for the ranks of Jamadar or Subedar with

great pride. Now our youngsters have got so many opportunities to demonstrate their talents.

Or, take this:

. . . He was a Hindu judge by the name of Chandani. After Independence, all his relatives had crossed over to Hindustan but he had stayed here, insisting that Sindhudesh was his real home. . . . In that whole gathering he was the only one who did into look a native. And at that time, it seemed as if the old man was serving out the collective sentences of all the punishments he had meted out in his court. I started wondering what *he* was doing here when one by one, even his gods had left this place. And once he had decided to stay on, he should have evinced faith in his new life, read the Kalma, worshipped Allah to ensure his redemption and spent the rest of his days in peace. . . . one word out of his mouth and he

would be nabbed as an alien in his own Sindhudesh!

Deewane Maulvi Sahab wonders – where all the Hindus have disappeared but then feels very happy with the thought that by and by all of them have embraced Islam. He stops to invoke Allah's blessings of the boundless wealth of abiding faith upon the whole world . . .

*Sleepwalkers* as an ironic statement on a monolithic society accommodates themes of nativity, rootlessness, meta-physical reconciliation and adaptation in an otherwise hostile environment. *Mohajirs* in Pakistan will ever remain *mohajirs*. History and politics will further perpetuate the stigmatised nomenclature.

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## Patriarchal Distortions in Folklore

For once the blurb does not exaggerate. Pankaj Singh's *Re-presenting Woman: Tradition, Legend and Panjabi Drama* is what the blurb says it is: "a pioneer study on Panjabi legends and drama from the gender perspective."

The study of gender in folklore started receiving attention only in the nineteen eighties. Studies of folk narratives are also hard to come by, particularly in India and this book is to my mind the first sustained interrogation of some popular traditional narratives of Punjab and it shows how patriarchal bias has led to the marginalization and misrepresentation of women in them. It is at the same time a close examination of how Panjabi dramatists have tried to *re-create* these narratives and *re-present* women along

more just, realistic and humanistic lines. Gender, as the author shows, is central to the examination of the past and by undertaking this study of Punjabi legends from the gender perspective she has opened up a new and fruitful territory for research into the folk narratives of the country and their contemporary reincarnations in a literary form in different languages of the country.

The book is based on the premise that the past of a society exercises a powerful hold over the present through the use of myth, legends and history. Myths, Pankaj Singh reminds us, "reflect, sustain and regulate the moral and cultural code of a living society" (2). Likewise, a legend is also a cultural construct which "gets privileged as the

collective wisdom of the ages . . . and becomes a pervasive element in the consciousness of a society. . . . Transmitted from generation to generation myths and legends on the one hand contribute to the continuity of a culture and on the other hand become instruments of control by encouraging conformity to the accepted social norms and discouraging occurrence of social deviance. Thus myth and legend become embodiments of dogma, preached not by sermonising but by storytelling, and function as 'illustrative media'" (4).

History too, despite its claim to objectivity, depends on "a continual selection and interpretation," which can never be value-free. "Myth, legend and history," she concludes, "are not neutral but politically motivated narratives,

- *Re-presenting Woman:*
- *Tradition, Legend and Panjabi Drama*
- by Pankaj K. Singh
- Indian Institute of Advanced Study
- 2000, pp. 192, Rs. 325.00