

A Half-Rhymed Tale of a Punjabi Girl

By Rizwan Akhtar

I

Since the last harvest
they dispatched the matchmaker
to all the neighbouring villages
to find a groom for their only daughter—
pampered and poked
as if a cotton-stuffed doll,
not knowing that marriage
is not a mystic's scroll
they named her after a *sufi*
like a tree of popular
she grew lean
but her butter-giggling complexion,
remained clean
under the blistering sun
she stood tall
and plastered cow-dung cakes
on the courtyard's wall
fed brown buffalo
churned it
with her hennaed hands,
lips burnt with red colour
and golden trinkets sang
at every stroke
the black braid went mad
as if preparing her for an epic match
she rolled *Rotis*
but mother rebuked her
for her poor kitchen skills

threatened that she would have a
pock-marked meddling mother-in-law
would throttle her all
with the help of a jibing sister-in-law
but that was a motherly petting
in rural Punjabi setting
that smelled of butter and spinach
and *desi* ghee
fried in a clayed pot
with womanly glee—
Rabia's father had unsettled nights,
he opened his till
flattered the matchmaker for her skill,
who came wrapped in a white *chaddar*
like a ghost from the dead
brought magnificent details
of grooms and lands
halcyons bridal plans
but nothing went Rabia's way,
she grew and grew
ripened like mangoes
until the juice oozed out
the stone began to mould,
grey hair appeared
she plucked it
with Punjabi moan,
her mother cursed their fall
but consoled all
and deposited motherly grief
in her shawl,
one by one she caressed her dowry
and sobbed with each golden jewel.

II

Twelve winters and summers left,
old trees doddered
new bloomed
the brown buffalo was doomed

her udders shrunk like berries,
 edgy and alone,
 her bucket boomed,
 she snivelled in the nights,
 when stars made a gallant stride
 the growls of jackals and dogs
 restrained her flights,
 till her school mate
 read her palm again
 said that her groom would be tall
 would twirl his moustache
 give her hundreds buffaloes
 seven sons and many halls
 but nobody called.

III

The morning *azan* echoed,
 she wiped her tears
 and reveries
 with her *duppata*,
 unrolled the prayer mat
 prayed and prayed,
 until a distant relative came
 revealed the mystical links of her name
 after that, went all the strain
 'A woman not made for marriage'
 she heard the resonance
 and alphabets clogged her brain,
 that began with *Alif*
 but cryptically
 the *Molbi* had explained.
 While her playmate
 went through travail for years,
 stripped acacia in the courtyard
 brought her to tears
 but her cow gave two shivering calves
 her father danced
 with grandfatherly laugh,

they gave free food,
boys wearing white caps
came and recited holy names,
she fixed their faulty Arabic tastes,
the father and mother
became prayer-mates,
in-between came a change
the Punjabi wench
was tamed,
and outcame another name,
they called her *Bibi*
this brought her new fame,
beads and chaplets
from the holy lands
were brought
the tales of marriage
were rolled off
rural wedding couplets
were tempered with devotional songs
the black braid turned into grey mane
the matchmaker disappeared
the acacia looked weird
but to sparrows she threw grains,
prayed for timely rains
and greater holy gains.