

# A childhood in Bahadurabad

*Zeeba Sadiq's 38 Bahadurabad continues to provide an absorbing portrait of Karachi's yesteryears — especially through the female gaze*

TAHA KEHAR

Karachi has become a literary plaything. Through a dynamic corpus of fiction, writers have lamented the shadow of violence that has laid siege to the city. In Kamila Shamsie's *In the City By The Sea* and Kartography, and Bilal Tanweer's *The Scatter Here is Too Great*, readers are offered multilayered dissections of the terror and solace that coexist in the streets and by-lanes of Karachi. Amid the clamorous din of voices that document the darker side of the metropolis, we often tend to overlook the writers who have captured the essence of Karachi's halcyon days — a time before the bombings, ethnic strife and bloodbaths.

A vast majority of novels that are set in Karachi have a distinct emphasis on the city's past. For instance, Amer Hussein's *Another Gulmohar Tree* bears echoes of early post-partition Karachi. With its evocative renderings of Hotel Metropole, Elphinstone Street and "rehearsed readings" at the British Council, the novel recreates a forgotten era and comes out with a compelling story.

Zeeba Sadiq's *38 Bahadurabad* (Faber and Faber, 1996) also provides an absorbing portrait of Karachi's yesteryears. In this emotionally resonant novel, the author recalls incidents and anecdotes from the 1960s that occurred in her childhood home in Karachi's neighbourhood of Bahadurabad. At first glance, the private residence isn't a glowing miniature of the city at large and often seems detached from its realities. And yet, Zeeba Sadiq's debut novel appears irrefutably real because it draws on the private sphere to depict the mood of the times rather than spooling outwards in search of a lost Karachi. This technique proves that what we remember about a city is largely influenced by personal recollections rather than events in the public domain.

Billed as a "unique blend of autobiography and fiction", the novel comprises a series of interconnected sketches that allow Zeebande Sadiq — a possible alter ego for the author — to revisit her formative years. Her recollections are fuelled by the impulse to understand the paradoxical image of Dr Sadiq, her beloved father, who, she discovered as a nine-year-old, was a bigamist and had another family. The author's quest to identify Dr Sadiq's hidden complexities pulls her into a whirlpool of memories associated with 38 Bahadurabad. The house, with its marble-tiled patio, coconut palms, rose bushes and rhododendrons, isn't just a locale in the book; it is a culmination of the time she spent with her father. Therefore, the novel can be perceived as an adult's effort to peel back the layers of the past and unravel truths that had been concealed from her.

*38 Bahadurabad* occupies a delicate, self-protective boundary between fiction and creative memoir. At first glance, the novel's shifting points of view and deviation

from the rigour of autobiographical accounts might encourage readers to believe that facts have been embellished with fictional detail. It is tempting to assume that Sadiq's novel carries the spirit of a creative memoir because it feeds our voracious appetite to probe deeper into the writer's personal life. However, *38 Bahadurabad* lacks the stylistic and intellectual fearlessness of other creative memoirs penned by Pakistani writers, such as Sara Suleri Goodyear and Hanif Kureishi. As a result, Zeeba Sadiq's book occupies the indeterminate boundaries between fiction and autobiography, and benefits from the ambiguity that comes with the territory. Had the author written a strictly autobiographical account, it would have been marred with narrative gaps and appear

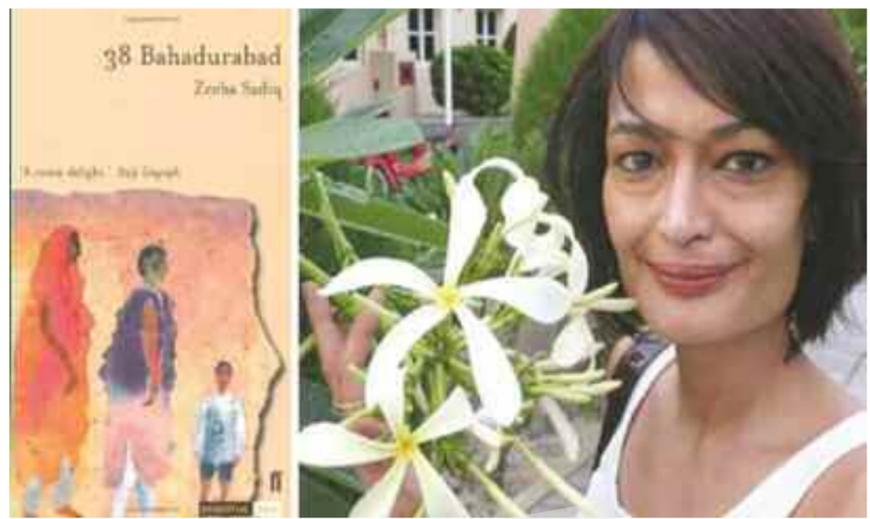
considered him a permanent facet of the waterfront street confused about the "secret turnings of his paradoxical...mind". The opening quote effectively represents Zeeba Sadiq's purpose for writing *38 Bahadurabad*: to examine the secret workings of her father's mind.

Even so, the narrative examines the inner recesses of Dr Sadiq's mind in an oblique manner. Throughout the novel, readers are immersed in the comfortable domesticity of Zeebande's childhood home. The author's recollections of her time with Dr Sadiq are inextricably linked with anecdotes about her mother Shemsunessa Shirazi (who is called Appaji), her much-married grandmother and their domestic helper Laxmi. With each in-

creasing crescendo of street noise and activity". While this passage points towards Dr Sadiq's brief moments of contemplation, the narrator doesn't profess to know the thoughts that streamed through his mind. Instead, she focuses on what she remembered about those moments. For that reason, the chapter ends on a lighter note, with Appaji chiding her husband for displaying "all the proclivities of a servant, and not those of a respected physician". In a similar vein, any references to the sad realities of her father's past are often neutralised by his ineptitude in specific domestic situations, and his amusement and consternation over his daughter's antics. This is primarily because Zeebande struggles to draw intricate lines of connection between her father's emotional journey and her own troubled nostalgia. As the book approaches its bleak end, the physician's death leaves the narrator in a conflicted state because the grief of losing a parent is conflated with the family's decision to bid farewell to their home.

With time, Zeebande carries with her the haunting truth that her father had abandoned his first family and that she was, in essence, "the gift of disobedience". Years later, when she encounters her half-brother as an adult, she discovers that he had been told about her existence but assumed that she was "some waif and stray" that Dr Sadiq had adopted. As a consequence, a journey towards understanding her father's motivation morphs into self-loathing and the vague belief that her father loved both families. A large number of these interconnected sketches veer away from Dr Sadiq and move deeper into the inner courtyard. This allows Zeebande to escape into the happier moments of her childhood and establish a safe distance from her mission to understand a father she will never truly know. Comic recollections of conversations with her mother and grandmother serve as a much-needed reminder that her childhood memories aren't entirely tainted by grief, even though she still carries invisible scars from the past.

*38 Bahadurabad* isn't the story of a neighbourhood in Karachi. Instead, it explores the private chaos of a happy childhood tarnished by loss. At no point do the characters appear disconnected from their social setting. Zeeba Sadiq's novel indicates the dramatic possibilities of weaving tales with people rather than places as the central focus. At a time when writers have mined the dark, distressing literary possibilities of life in Karachi, the shift towards people-centric narratives may serve as a blessing in disguise. Zeeba Sadiq, who was born in Karachi and spent her life in London, passed away in 2010. Apart from *38 Bahadurabad*, she penned an unpublished novel titled *A Suit of Knight* and the introduction to a 2007 edition of William Hazlitt's *Liber Amoris: Or the New Pygmalion*. However, *38 Bahadurabad* bears testimony to her ability to use humour, human foible and tragedy to present a memorable story about a city that



somewhat incomplete. The novel's opening quote has been taken from John Steinbeck's *Sweet Thursday*, the sequel to *Cannery Row*. The passage refers to Lee Chong, the grocery store owner on California's Cannery Row who appears in the prequel but doesn't feature in *Sweet Thursday*, as a "dragon of goodness". In the sequel, it is revealed that Lee Chong has sold his emporium and retired, leaving those who

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terlocking sketch, Zeebande recovers a lost slice of history — be it a comic moment, a painful memory or a confession. More often than not, the narrator makes a conscious effort to straddle the private moments of sadness with an element of comic relief as a way of coping with dark memories.

For instance, in Dr Sadiq and the Servants, she recalls how her father would "pause to enjoy the early-morning birdsong" while he would be gardening before it was "lost amid a

## Of the human heart and the peacemaker

Hamed Amiri's new book is not only a trek through the refugee experience of a family in crisis but also a love letter to the NHS

SANA MUNIR

Moscow. Dad said, 'We're almost there.' I didn't know what this meant. Almost where? We didn't even know where we were going. He smiled brightly, but I could sense he was uneasy."

The *Boy With Two Hearts*, a non-fiction narrative by Afghan-British writer, Hamed Amiri is a trek through the refugee experience of an Afghan family, from Herat in Afghanistan to Cardiff in the United Kingdom (UK). The writer takes us from an Afghanistan under the control of the Taliban, through the jungles of Ukraine, the paved streets of Moscow, the unexpected comradeship in a concentration camp and a fearful experience of another, until we reach the UK. While the writer is conscious of giving voice to all the characters in his story — his stoic father, empathetic mother, the protagonist of the book Hussein, the baby brother who is taken care of and Hamed himself, the middle child. While the reader is aware, they are reading a true story, and a non-fictional narrative, the reader feels trapped in the boot of the 4x4 to escape border patrol, they are jilted when the kind-looking man who offers candy turns out to be a charlatan, the readers want to grab Hussein, the protagonist when he is left behind in a field because he cannot walk as fast as his brothers due to a worsening heart condition.

The story is so captivating, that the characters spring out of the textual discourse and one begins to understand their dilemmas, celebrate their successes, experience their tests. At the same time, though, owing to the lucid flow and continuous narration, *The Boy With Two Hearts* is also suited to those who are fond of reading fiction, for the story is soulful, and the narration, simple but fluent. One might be reminded of *The Last Lecture*, by college professor Randy Pausch from Pittsburgh, who wrote his autobiography when the doctors told him he had only a few weeks to live. This book, *The Boy With Two Hearts*, in comparison, is a posthumous memoir. It has the same spirit as Pausch's, for the crescendo in both books is that of death but still, not of loss or despair but of growth and hope.

The question, however, is: is the refugee experience easy to write about? Speaking with private news paper, Hamed Amiri, the author of *The Boy With Two Hearts* explains, "Putting out my own emotional trauma for the world to read was not easy at all. However, when writing about the experience of escape, and uncertainty, and hiding, to the passage of relief and settling down, I asked myself a simple question - would the sharing of my inner



feelings help someone else? This question was asked of myself, not once but several times, when I felt vulnerable when I felt I could not do justice to every memory of the days that we spent huddled and bundled, every moment of gloom and doom and each blissful day of togetherness wrought with the positivity Hussein added to our home and of several others. Each time, the answer I found to these questions was, I had to write it, to help another person or another family, trying to find solace, recompense and answers to a similar trauma of losing a loved one." On whether writing this book has been cathartic for him, or a significant part of his healing

process, Amiri says, "After I lost Hussein, I recall the feeling of coming to face two choices: the first was to lock myself in a room to hide from the world, cry, question and consume my mind with negative thoughts, maybe undo what Hussein had built inside of me all through life. The second option was to utilise my pain and translate that into something useful but also eternalise Hussein for me, to have him and his memory in physical form to hold, cherish and love."

"I ended up locking myself in a room, but to write about our journey through life, through boyhood and adulthood, together. I not only feel closer to Hussein and have come to terms with the biting reality of loss but also feel, that this book has helped me dig up those of my emotions which I was afraid to explore, and put them into words. It was only after writing the book that I realised, writing not only became my healing process but also gave me a new purpose." Hamed's brother Hussein, had a problem with his heart, which made his family travel from Afghanistan to the UK, where the family of five settled.

The very complicated and tense voyage which involved dealers and handlers, police and border patrol searches, hiding in containers and escaping from hard luck, is undoubtedly, peppered with the more filial and emotional side of the story — the burden of the middle child who has emotional responsibilities towards the older sibling and fatherly considerations for the youngest. The mother who, despite making fiery speeches against the Taliban in Herat, takes a secondary role in decision making once the family is out in the open. The multiple scares given by Hussein's two hearts — the biological one and the peacemaker — are all examples of how the stressful course of the journey is made acceptable with a delicate probing of filial love. The blurb on the jacket of the book declares it a love letter to the National Health Service (NHS) in the UK, a respectful nod to the NHS not just in one country but everywhere, in the times of the global pandemic where health workers, doctors and nurses are front line workers.

The book is timely, then, one might consider. Having said that, the narration constantly talks of a Dr Nav Masani, Hussein's doctor. "I never forget telling people that the NHS gave me my brother for several more years, I never thought much past that but as you said the NHS has a very diverse workforce and Hussein's main consultant eventually became a part of the family," says Hamed

about the importance of writing about the coloured element of the NHS. Of being smuggled from one continent to the other with family, of having a heart that needs extra care and attention than any normally functioning blood pump, of losing a loved one, and of coming to face one's own most terrifying fears through self-exploration, the book has it all. Hamed must write more.

*The Boy With Two Hearts*  
Author: Hamed Amiri  
Publisher: Icon Books  
Pages: 304 (Hardback)  
Price: \$24

## Reflection of the times

SARWAT ALI

Dabistaan Khul Gaya, a collection of articles by Asghar Nadeem Syed is mostly about individual writers and poets — almost all his contemporaries, both senior and junior, that he has had the occasion to be acquainted with. The most significant pieces in the collection are his analyses of the various literary and artistic trends during the period.

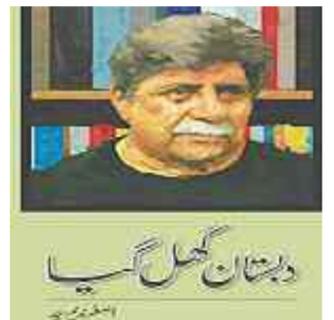
In some of the articles, he seems to be taking a fresh look at the various positions that had once defined the critical literary divisions during the greater part of the twentieth century. The most important among them is his review of the various reactions to the domination by the West — particularly its colonial encounter with the subcontinent — and the many stances taken in relation to that great turn of history. Syed, like many of us, got exposed to the West, as it exists now, by frequenting it and interacting with the Diaspora from the subcontinent that has lived there for more than a generation now. The changing world and the condition of the people living there made him aware of other perspectives; of the various controversies that surrounded the domination of the Indian subcontinent by the West, particularly the British, and the various intellectual debates that ensued from there.

In his book, he reaches the conclusion that everything is subject to change — the stated positions, the ideologies, the status of the community, the nations in the world — as there is no finality to the various positions that one takes. It all changes with time, the historical developments reconfigure the past as well.

He also takes a pot shot at the resistance theme or the result of literature that came about due to resistance. He doesn't seem too happy about narrowing the definition and restricting it by attaching qualifications to it, and questions in the end why it is so.

The collection takes the entire thing in a much broader light. For Syed, all literature is resistance or resistance literature because it means the breaking of new ground. There cannot be great or good literature unless it questions and challenges the prevalent literary positions or the artistic stances taken. All literature, according to him, challenges the status quo and not in the political sense alone, hence it all falls conveniently in the category of resistance literature. Literature that goes along with the status quo or the prevalent realities is not worth the paper it is written on. Another important piece is about Iqbal's views on drama and its resultant condemnation. Being a stage, screen and television playwright Syed finds it indigestible and impossible to gulp that Iqbal — one of the greatest minds of the last century — has traditionally placed plays or drama on a lower level than poetry.

He goes on to offer examples at great strength of visual imagery and the dramatic intensity in the poetry of Iqbal. The build-up to a situation and then its reso-



lution, elements essential to drama, have been repeatedly applied in the poetry of Iqbal. Iqbal shunned ghazal as his representative form of expression and chose the poem or the nazm, long as well as short. In most of his longer poems, Iqbal builds up the narrative and then employs all the techniques of drama in it for it to have maximum impact. Syed is surprised that Iqbal used all the instruments of drama in his poetry, yet denounced it as a lower-level art compared to poetry.

Probably he was against drama as a form and not the dramatic narrative. The latter has been part of the literary tradition of the subcontinent with fine examples from Persian poetry, which formed the prototype to be followed. It was perhaps not the dramatic narrative, but the drama as an autonomous form that Iqbal did not favour. And it is simply because drama as an autonomous form does not necessarily have the guiding hand or the overarching third-person narrative to let the action and the individual characters take a course independent and free of the guiding hand. Iqbal was not in favour of drama because maybe drama has various points of views expressed with equal authenticity, and it becomes impossible to prefer one over the other for that could mean damaging the entire structure of the piece. He wanted a dramatic narrative where the overarching point of view does not allow the required action to develop on its own. This guiding hand, he called the integrity of khudi, the single-minded narrative or the self that may seem divided but still speaks ultimately with one voice. The division of the self, a negative property or a value seen as either weakness or hypocrisy, robs one of the strengths of conviction.

There is one common thread running through the collection of the articles. They don't appear as individual pieces but strung together by a certain point of view. Perhaps it would be difficult to say what that point of view is but a shared concern about ideological positions spilling over into the arts, necessitating a revision or rethinking. It is more reflective of the times that one lived in and not a mere recounting of controversies of the past. Syed is thus spot on in bringing the literary debate to the present times.

*Dabistaan Khul Gaya*  
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