

Psychoraag
Suhayl Saadi

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'The time is wan o'clock. Ah'm Zaf-Zaf-Zaf and Ah'm yer ghost. Host, Ah mean, host. Aye, whitivir. Ye're listenin, this morning, tae *The Junnune Show* oan Radio Chaandni broadcastin oan 99.9 meters FM.' On the third floor of a deconsecrated Glasgow church, DJ ('disc joakie') Zaf is at the microphone. This is his last broadcast for the Asian community radio station he has been livening up for the past 3 months, and he is already an hour into the graveyard shift, midnight till six.

For once, he is not taking requests. Holed up in his twenty-by-twenty cubicle, 'safe from gangs and girlfriends' (so he thinks), he is on air, ad-libbing to his own choice of music. The Beatles, Asian Dub Foundation, The Cosmic Rough Riders, Joi, Les Negresses Vertes, the Sufi-inspired keening of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan: all the while, Zaf talks to the insomniacs who might just be listening. Urdu words and phrases tumble through his demotic Glaswegian. Junnune, rhyming implausibly with Dunoon, means madness, possession. Zaf is working himself up into a trance, pleading with his record collection to tell him who he is. This is his raag.

It is no accident that Saadi, a 43-year Glasgow physician whose book of stories *The Burning Mirror* received high acclaim 3 years ago, takes a DJ as his hero for his first novel: if nationality has become something of an anachronism and globalism a necessity (at least for economic reasons), then music, in which culture is dissociated from territory, is the only way to big it up. The sonosphere (to coin a term) is the advance guard of something like a world society. Zaf, perhaps just a bit too conveniently, has a degree in ethnology: when he starts searching for his identity in the northern part of 'these slim-waisted islands' (a part of the world not entirely unfamiliar with identity crises), what shows up is anything but settled. Crossings, diasporas, doublings and mixings are at loose in the world; 'a real mix ae auld an new, of Eastern an Western an aw points in between.'

Four people are on Zaf's mind. Standard English is used to tell the almost unbelievably romantic story of his father and mother, Jamil and Rashida, who, in the heat of their adulterous affair in Lahore, flee Pakistan in a 'battered black Ford Popular' and make for 'great *Mata* Inglistan', where they will be able to live, they hope, free of interference from the 'baratherie' (the extended family). But freedom proves a cruel mirage. Zaf's father can only find work in the Glasgow sewers, and years later, after escaping from this circle of Dante's hell, finds himself pursued in his dreams by the rats he saw underground: he is institutionalised with presenile dementia.

Now former engineer Jamil Ayaan doesn't recognise Zaf, and confuses him with the infant son he abandoned in Lahore. Rashida, Zaf's *maa*, runs the cornershop alone, 'a walkin pillar of guilt.'

Even more intractable than the sad life of his parents is Zaf's relationship with his two lovers. Zilla, his long-term Asian girlfriend, his 'shadae', has ended up a junkie, selling herself in a grim tenement where 'ivirythin wis claw, tooth, saliva'. Zaf's guilt about the seemingly inexorable end of their relationship turns to fear when Zilla turns out to be a kind of avenging angel, a djinn. His relationship with Babs, an energetic nurse from Galloway who drives a 'lightning-blue Kawasaki', is hardly less guilt-ridden or ambivalent. He surrenders himself to her since she seems to be spared his curse. But then, in an archly climactic moment, she calls him 'her brown god'. So much for colour-blindness. Zilla and Babs are the primal Lilith and Eve of Zaf's increasingly fevered imagination.

Saadi's novel is more impressive than these rather too tidy Jungian pairs might suggest. *Psychoraag* is actually a 400-page-long dramatic monologue; and while it sometimes reads like being trapped in a sound-box with the sound of the cosmos, Zaf's restless journeying turns away from the loveless strictures of 'Wahabi Calvinism' as firmly as it strives to demonstrate that we have more in common than we might suspect. Scottish culture has lagged well behind the actual realities of life for Asian Scots, and although Saadi takes pains to show how negatively Pakistan is seen in Britain, especially with respect to 'cool' India ('[Pakistanis] were always seen as immigrants and never as emigrants or expatriates'), his novel actually plays the old tune of identity itself, all our identities, in dear places that really all deserve the one name: Absurdistan.

The book is handsomely produced by the new Edinburgh publishing house of Black and White. Zaf's playlist turns up in the endpapers for anyone who might care to replicate his 6-hour show, along with a 7-page glossary of mainly Urdu terms. 'Raag' spells out precisely what Saadi has been doing: 'Raags convey various emotions; such as anger, love, sadness, humour, wonder, fear and peace; and are classified according to times of the day, month or season. Personalised descriptions of a raag enable a musician to meditate on its characteristics and to unite his or her personality with a particular mood and, thereby, instil the same mood in the audience.' 'Haa ji', Zaf says to his father at the end of their journey through the night; he whispers it into the microphone; and then he sings it. It is Molly Bloom's 'yes'.

Iain Bamforth