

Ali Khan: In the Classroom

I step into the cold, quiet classroom.
As always,
Rain joins me, knocking on the window.

Miss Hayes begins her stories of,
King Henry, Edward, Charles,
Of Queen Mary, Victoria, Elizabeth.
Of familial bloodshed and a growing empire.

My classmates,
Henry, Ed, Charlie,
Mary, Vicky, Lizzie,
Beam with pride when
Their royal counterparts are mentioned.

But where am I?

I beam with excitement to hear histories.
Stories of Shakespeare, bold, witty and innovative.
Stories of World Wars, shocking and devastating.

But where am I?

Through the events of war, romance and religion.
My eyes glisten with muse.
My ears peak with interest.
I sit on the edge of my seat, waiting,
For a story I didn't know existed.

A story where my name was recognisable.
Where the colours of my country brightened my classmates' imagination.
Where my mother tongue, its bold innovations, its rhythms,
Were enjoyed by others as I enjoy that Shakespearean beat,
de-DUM de-DUM de-DUM de-DUM de-DUM.

This rhythm,
Foreign and new to me,
Was exciting and inspiring.
The room filled with ideas and sounds novel to me.

I wonder if Henry and Mary would feel the same if they heard *ghazal* or *tilawat*.
If they saw *banghra* on TV or at a wedding...

Would they listen intently the way I did to Miss Hayes?
Would the guttural, musical and poetic words inspire them too?

I don't know.

But like the rain rapping on the windows,
I look for a way in.

The bell rings.

I step out of the classroom.

I take the dreary road home.

To a home of bright, bold colours,
Of spices,
Of multi-lingual concoctions.

Assalamu-Alaikum when I step in.

Like Narnia, I walk into a different world.
With different characters, sounds, words, gestures, stories, foods...

Wa-Alaikum-Assalam when my mother sees me.

The classroom already feels like decades long gone.
The excitement for the Tudors slipped away.
The classroom was someone else's space.

But I'll go again tomorrow and wonder:
Where are my stories?
Where are my names?
Where am I in this classroom?

Translations:

Ghazal: Arabic, Persian, Hindi, Urdu poetic style – often about love and loss.

Tilawat: Reading and recitation of the Quran.

Banghra: Punjabi folk dance infused with drums.

Assalamu-Alaikum: Peace be upon you – A Muslim greeting.

Wa-Alaikum-Assalam: And peace be upon you (too).