

## The Village Court

### A Short Story

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Ikram sold cosmetics and items for women and children. He travelled on his brakeless Sohrab bicycle through the scattered villages on the Damaan plains, peddling his wares. The itinerant hawker was a well-known figure in the village of Kot Lalu. Upon his arrival into the village he would blow his rusty whistle beguilingly, and women, girls, and children would gravitate towards him like rats of Hamelin. His weathered bicycle groaned under his wares. Only its saddle and pedals were visible. The rest of the bicycle was buried under cartons, baskets, and bundles that housed lipsticks, creams, perfumes, hairclips, face powders, glass bangles, fake jewelry, looking glasses, toys, and toffees. Only Ikram had the knack of riding or wheeling a bicycle so chaotically laden with goods.

The chatty hawker was a cheerful, decent man. He would exchange gossip and news with his female customers, cracking jokes with them and asking them about their kids and their lives. He ran tabs for ladies who were strapped for cash. Sometimes the women paid him in eggs, wheat, or butter oil. If Ikram was thirsty he asked the women for water, and if he was hungry he asked them for bread. His female customers obliged graciously.

Seldom did the village men buy anything from the hawker. They held a very low opinion of him. In their view, he was a crafty and clever creature who made his living by preying upon the imaginations of ignorant village women, and tricking them into buying his substandard trinkets. The village men considered Ikram effeminate and weak, as he shunned manly professions like farming or herding or wood-chopping. Some men would shoo him away from their doors so that he wouldn't be able to entice their women and children into buying his third-rate stuff. But the women folk always held him in high esteem. For them he was a huge source of modern trends in fashion and news from the outside world. He gave the village women useful beauty tips and offered them advice about their children's health. He had once lived and worked in Karachi, and he told the women breathtaking stories of the city with its sky-hugging buildings, and the fashionable ladies that walk in high heels in busy markets. For the illiterate village housewives whose horizons were limited, the hawker was an entertainer, educator, and trendsetter.

His arrival into the village was always keenly awaited, especially before festive occasions like Big and Small Eid.

Although the forty-year-old wheat-colored hawker hailed from a village, his clothes were relatively well-stitched and cleaner than the clothes of other villagers. His lustrous eyes were

always lined with kohl; his well-oiled, raven hair was done in the style of film actors', and his clothes exuded a heady fragrance of attar. He was a short man, and inwardly he seemed painfully aware of it, but God had compensated him in another way—he was blessed with a long aristocratic nose. He had been married for ten years and had sired four children.

It was whispered among the womenfolk of Kot Lalu that the hawker was having an affair with the potter's wife who had borne three children. They said that Ikram spent more time at his beloved's door, and gave her cosmetics and knick-knacks either for free or at an insanely low price.

Mid-June's punishing sun was in the middle of the sky and the village streets lay deserted. The villagers had confined themselves to their homes or thatched sheds that were erected in the orchards. A farmer, who had searched every nook and cranny of the village for his lost donkey, found himself at the village graveyard. The fenceless cemetery sprawled over a huge area. He was scanning it for his lost donkey when he saw a reflection of something from a clump of trees. Goaded by curiosity, the farmer pushed on through the tangle of vegetation and young acacias towards the source of the reflection. It was coming from a looking glass that was suspended from the handlebar of the hawker's Sohrab bicycle, which was propped up against a gnarly tree in the middle of the graveyard. Then he heard whispering from a nearby clump of toothbrush trees. He tiptoed to the clump, parted the lacy branches, and saw the hawker and the potter's wife engaged in an amorous tête-à-tête.

The peeping Tom hurried to his friends who were playing cards under the thatched shed in the village community centre. He told them what he had witnessed in the cemetery. A posse of ten men rushed to the scene and crept into the clump of toothbrush trees, catching the besotted pair in the act. Ikram and his lover scrambled to their feet and made a dash towards the exit point, but the glowering men had blocked all routes of escape. Gibbering like a monkey, the hawker went down on bended knees and beseeched the men to forgive him. Weeping, the woman threw her head scarf at the men's feet and begged them to let her go, but they wouldn't listen to their pleas.

'Have you no respect for the deceased? Weren't you ashamed for the dead who are buried here? You call yourself Muslim? Even a Kafir would not dare to do such a filthy thing in the graveyard.' The first villager gave the hawker a stinging clout across the face.

'Blacken their faces with soot, seat them on a donkey, and give them a tour of the village,' the second man screamed.

'Hang garlands of old broken shoes around their sinful necks,' the third man thundered.

'Take the adulterous couple to the mullah. He shall decide it according to sharia.' The fourth man stamped his foot.

The hawker's mistress slumped to the ground and started writhing in the dust like a crushed bug. The men let her go, but captured her lover. First they thrashed him brutally, then tied his hands behind his back with his shoulder sheet and dragged him to the village community centre.

The news that the hawker and the potter's wife were found in a compromising position spread through Kot Lalu like wildfire. The male villagers converged upon the community centre. The offender was tied to the leg of a charpoy. Tears were rolling down his cheeks; saliva was drooling from his mouth, and his hair was awry. Every newcomer gave him two or three spicy slaps in the face or hot kicks to his side. Some made shaming gestures at him, and others spat at him. One man brought a platter full of fresh cow dung and dumped it over the hawker's head.

'I have eaten crap! I have committed an awfully wicked thing. Please pardon me! I will never do it again. I will never set foot in this village again,' the hawker begged the village chief.

'You should have thought about it before. But lust rendered you blind. This is a village of respectable people. This is not a brothel.' The old village chief lashed him with his crooked waking stick.

Later, the village headman sent for the potter, but he had gone to the neighbouring village to sell pots, pitchers, and spouted jugs. The news had hit the nearby villages. Some men got onto their bicycles and whooshed to Kot Lalu, anticipating some action. The news reached the farmers and goatherds, and they raced towards the village to witness the drama. The community centre heaved with men and boys. To get a better view of the proceedings, several men had climbed the roofs and walls of their houses.

More than five cooking disks were brought to the scene. Those who stood close to the hawker scraped soot from the lower side of the cooking disk with their fingers and then applied the dark powder to his face. He looked like a stage character of some morality play being punished for his sins. Some laughed at him and some hurled abuse. Then from nowhere appeared garlands made out of old, broken shoes. The shoe-garlands were put around the hawker's neck. A boy was passing by with his donkey laden with fuel wood. The spectators pushed the load off the beast's back and dragged it into the community centre. The ringleaders made the hawker ride the creature, and it was led out into the street followed by the shouting, clapping crowd. The hawker sat hunched on the donkey. The broken shoes hung from his neck like dried gourds. They yelled abuse at the rider. Some men beat the donkey while others beat the rider. Twice he was given a tour of the village. Afterwards he was brought back to the community centre in a pathetic condition.

The congregants offered opinions as to what sort of punishment Ikram deserved. Some said that the case should be reported to the police; some suggested that his throat be slit, while others maintained that his nose should be chopped off. After a while, the village court agreed upon the last punishment. Now the question was, who would cut off the hawker's nose? The ringleaders

sent for the barber but he had gone to a nearby village to perform circumcision on a child. Instead, they sent another man to the barber's house to ask his wife to lend them a razor, but she replied that her husband had taken all his tools with him. The ringleaders looked at one another.

Rolling up his sleeves, a middle-aged goatherd stepped forward. He pulled out a small, tough knife from his pocket. The ringleaders pinioned the culprit, who bleated like a goat. Unhurriedly, the goatherd touched the hawker's nose on each side. He thought for a while, and then positioned the shiny blade on the nasal bridge and pressed. In a flash, the nose had been sliced off neatly. The amputator held it, dripping with blood, between his thumb and forefinger and showed it to the crowd. The throng let out a thundering roar of moral triumph. The amateur surgeon placed the nose in an upright position on his callused left palm. It looked like a frog on the verge of taking a leap. He knocked it down with the tip of his bloody knife so it lay on its side. For some moments he examined the dismembered organ, and then threw it down on the ground as if it were a malignant growth. The spectators crowded around the nose. They expected it to jump, dance, and wriggle like the hacked-off tail of a lizard, but it showed no sign of life. The villagers looked a little disappointed. The nose lay on the ground motionless, like a small pear chopped in half. One villager tentatively kicked it with the toe of his shoe. Another hurled a stone at it, and yet another struck it with a stick. Then, a flight of stones, clods, sticks, and brickbats landed on the nose until it was buried under a heap of assorted missiles.

The onlookers had lost interest in the owner of the nose, who was screaming in excruciating pain. A small fountain of blood was bubbling from the place where once had stood a long, proud, aristocratic nose. It ran into the hawker's mouth, spilling over his chin and then down his neck, painting his shirt crimson red.

The disoriented, noseless hawker lurched to his feet. He placed his shoulder sheet on the bleeding stump and stumbled towards the exit. No one stopped him leaving.

'Where are you going?' someone remarked. 'Will you not take your snout with you? Gentlemen, give him back his nose. After all, it's his property.' Mad laughter erupted from the crowd.

'No, we won't do that,' the village chief said. 'We should feed it to the dogs.'

'No –' the amputator replied. 'Even dogs wouldn't eat the nose of an adulterer.'

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