

5. Love Across The Salt Desert

Keki N. Daruwalla

About the writer

Keki N. Daruwalla is a well-known Indian short story writer and poet. He was born in Lahore in 1937. Keki N. Daruwalla began his career as a government servant and was also a member of the Commonwealth observer group to Zimbabwe in 1980. His writings reflect sensitivity to human feelings. He has authored several books and is a recipient of Sahitya Akademi award.

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The drought in Kutch had lasted for three successive years. Even when clouds were sighted they passed by, ignoring the stricken country. The monsoons had, so to speak, forgotten the land. The Rann lay like a paralyzed monster, its back covered with scab and scar tissue and dried blister-skin. The earth had cracked and it looked as if chunks of it had been baked in a kiln and then embedded in the soil crust. The cattle became thin and emaciated. The oxen died. The camel alone survived comfortably, feeding on the *bawal*, camel-thorn. Then one day the clouds rolled in like wineskins and the lightening crackled and the wineskins burst. Though two years have passed since the drought ended, everyone remembers that it first rained on the day when Fatimah entered the village. This is how she came.

What would he not do for her, the daughter of the spice-seller; she who smelt of cloves and cinnamon, whose laughter had the timbre of ankle-bells, whose eyebrows were like black wisps of the night and whose hair was the night itself? For her he would cross the salt desert!

He had stayed the day at Kala Doongar, a black hill capped with basalt, the highest in Kutch. He had set his camel, Allaharakha, free to crop on the *bawal* trees. At dusk he paid homage to the footprints of the *Panchmai Pir* on the hilltop. He left some food there and started beating on his thali, according to the custom here. In a few minutes jackals materialized and gobbled up the food. This was auspicious. If they had not turned up he would have considered the ill-effects of the omen serious enough to have cancelled the journey. A lamp was lighted in the *Pir*'s honour every night on the hilltop and the flame

could be seen all the way from Khavda. Over a hundred years earlier the *Panchmai Pir* had trudged these salt wastes serving the people, accompanied, as legend had it, by a jackal. Reclusive by habit he used to retire to thorn jungles, where apart from his vulpine companions none else dared to disturb his nocturnal trysts. The custom of feeding the jackals had lingered since then.

Najab bowed before the flame and set out. He left behind the camel- thorn shrubs and the area once famous for its savannahs of stunted grass, but now sere and brown as desert. He had left behind all human habitation, Kuran being the last village. For the next three days he would not be seeing any *bhungas*, those one- room mud houses, circular at the base, but tapering into conical thatch roofs at the top. Now only the sand- scapes stretched out before him, mile upon mile. Water splashed in the *chagals*. With the name of *Pir* on his lips Najab Hussain set forth.

Najab's diffidence was notorious among his friends. He was known to have blushed at the mere mention of a girl. A strangely introverted lad with dreamy eyes, no one had ever associated him with any act of bravado. His father, Aftab, would say. "All that my ancestors and I have acquired during a hundred years, this lad will squander away, not because he is a spendthrift but because he will be too shy to charge money for what he sells!"

He had crossed the Rann on four occasions earlier, though he had turned twenty only a month ago. But each time he had either accompanied his father or that wily old smuggler Zaman, the veteran of a hundred illegal trips into Sind. Each time they had taken *tendu* leaf worth about five hundred, and sold it across the border for twelve hundred. But between the pay- off to officials and to the intermediaries who arranged the sale of *biri* leaf, to the man who took the camel out to graze and to the friend or relative who harbored them, there was precious little left. It was just enough to buy some used terylene garments and then it was time to make the long trek back across the desert. It was during one of these trips that they had stayed with Kaley Shah, the clove- seller. "He is a distant relative of your mother, his father had told Najab. Kaley Shah was tall, and well- fleshed and his thick- jowled face had a purple tinge about it as if somewhere along the way it had got stuck with a discolored patch. He always wore a *tahmat* of black and white checks. Within a day Najab discovered that the fellow was an absolute rogue who drove such a cussed bargain that for the first time in his hearing father started mouthing obscenities.

But his daughter Fatimah was a *hoor* with eyes so bright that they would have lit up the darkness of the underworld. She was taken by this quiet, pleasant young man so ready with his smiles. But she could hardly elicit a word out of him. Fatimah had been

under pressure to get engaged to someone in the village known for his slurred speech and grotesque stammer. “Just my luck to run into mutes”, she thought. But then, as she caught him staring at her, she laughed back. And in the evening when Fatimah repeated the performance and her face flooded with excitement as if she dared him to take the next step, he had flung his arms around her in a reckless dizzy moment. Yes, he would come again, he told her, and saw her start with disbelief for he seemed to have answered her inarticulated question: Would he come again? This time he would come alone with no father or uncle to cramp his style. And as he left, he looked behind to find her gaze following him, her eyes like a pair of storm lanterns in the dark.

Ever since his return to Khavda, Najab had been straining to get away. What was there about the Rann that he did not know? He could cross the Rann in the daylight, leave alone starlight, a thing none of his elders had dared to do! And one morning Aftab was woken up by a shout from Zaman. What does the old rogue want, he muttered rubbing his sleepy eyes. Zaman asked about Najab’s whereabouts.

“The boy has been sulking of late but he should be around. Anyway, what business is it of yours?” The old man did not hide his irritation.

“Who are you trying to fool, Aftab Mian?” asked the smuggler. “Don’t you know that Allaharakha is also missing?”

In these border villages the pattern of life was such that if a man was absent along with his camel, it was taken for granted that he had made a foray across the desert into Pakistan.

Aftab went into the mud enclosure where his camel was kept and found it empty. His heart sank. He ran into the house to see if the bundles of *tendu* leaf he had bought had been taken by the boy. “Oh, the fool! That son of a fool!” exclaimed Aftab, almost shaking with fury. “He has forgotten to take the leaf with him!”

“Who are you trying to fool with all this drama?” called out Zaman who was still standing at the door. “This son of yours is not as innocent as the world believes. He is a pig and the son of a pig.”

There was no limit to the chagrin. Zaman was the chief, the man who kept the Rangers across happy. Anyone crossing the Rann without his support was running the gauntlet with the law. And here this fledgling had blundered in without as much as a word to him, or a *salaam*, or a hundred rupee note.

“May Allah bring him safely out of this!” said the old rogue piously. He means just the opposite, thought Aftab. Nothing would please him more than to see Najab turned into carrion with vultures hovering around.

“Don’t worry, Zaman, Allah will see him through!” he said testily and banged the door in the smuggler’s face.

As Zaman stalked off, Aftab went in to break the news of their son’s escapade to his wife. She would faint, he thought. He found her crouching with her back against the mud wall. She did not even blink in surprise, once. She was waist- deep in this conspiracy along with her son and never even breathed a word about it. His eye fell on her bare arm.

“Where is that gold bangle my father gave you, woman.”

“You need not worry. Najab will return with cloves.”

The long striding Allaharakha kept a brisk pace. A strong south wind drove the tang of the Kori creek hack into Najab’s nostrils. He followed the stars, the Milky Way flaked with mica the Great Bear shambling towards the north. Before dawn he had reached his destination, for a sandy elevation palisaded with the bones of dead animals told him that he had arrived at Sarbela, over twenty miles from Kala Doongar. He was already beyond the international boundary. Here he rested. During daylight, movement was impossible. The Indus Rangers would be looking from their bamboo watch- towers. And in the heat everything became a *mirage*. A depression in the sand looked like a splash of water, a freak, stunted cactus gave the appearance of a grove, and a camel looked like a huge prehistoric animal on the move. Any movement was sure to be noticed through binoculars.

When the sun came up Najab took his first drink of water from his *chagal*. At noon he had his first meal- dry, stale bread with onion. By now thoughts about Fatimah took a vice- like grip over him. An entire night lay between them, he thought. And the distance was less than ten miles. The thought of it made him writhe even as the sun started heating its hammer on the anvil of the desert. A whiff of the tangy south wind caught his nostrils again. But this time it brought with it a thin dappled veil of cloud, patches of which lay overlapping like fish scales. Within an hour this corrugated cloud had covered a substantial portion of the sky, looking for all the world like a stretch of wind-rippled sand. Yes, this was the time! He got up and shook the sand from his turban. Even as he harnessed his camel he thought that Allaharakha was looking at him quizzically, as if asking what the hell he was up to. At one level of consciousness he knew that this was madness. He knew of overworked camels dying of fatigue, of the patrolling parties of the B.S.F and Indus Rangers and the mirage- chequered, trackless wastes of the desert. But he succumbed to a rush of blood and the face of Fatimah beckoned him like a mirage.

Najab crossed the International Boundary Pillar Number 1066. He knew the track he had to take, bisecting the two posts of the Indus Rangers at Jagtarai and Vingoor.

But he strayed ever so slightly, and from their watch- tower they saw through their binoculars this sleek camel, warped and distorted by the heat shimmer into a lumbering leviathan. An Indian slipping into their territory with *tendu* leaf right under their noses, and that too without paying any hush money! They were not going to stand for it. Najab was in a trance now events flashing past him like figures on a screen. The mile-long chase, the firing from behind, the spent bullets flipping in the sand and then the rising wind which churned the dust into his eyes and then rose between the hunter and the hunted. When the dust settled half an hour later he was alone in the Rann.

The next few hours passed in a daze. He was mortally scared that Allaharakha may die of fatigue. To ease him of his burden he now started walking beside him. Within an hour the sail had scraped the callus from his feet and scarred them with agonizing cracks. Under a hot tin sky, the Rann was blazing now, throwing up white needles which hurt the eyes. And as the Rann palpitated, it haunted him with its mirage, pools of shadow, scooped half- moons of water. Hours of wandering as if in trance, attempting to lick the receding edges of the mirage. Then light thinning away, and an hour or two later, dusk, and a thin plume of smoke rising from a dung fire. Allah be praised! He was now within range.

He waited for night to descend and then struck out hobbling on his toes, for this desert Odyssey had cost him his heels. Within an hour he was at the clove seller's door.

Fatimah rose from her bed like a panic- stricken doe as he called out her name softly through the window bars. It took some anxious moments for it to sink in that it was Najab. Her lustrous eyes lit up the dark of the room as she opened the door.

Two hours before dawn, Kaley Shah was woken up by the beat constable banging on the door. "A smuggler has come across the Rann, Kaley Shah. You wouldn't know anything about him, would you?"

"*Kasam tumhari*, not a sparrow has entered the house, or the village. Even the dogs have not been barking tonight." Then he added with a knowing wink. "Why should a smuggler come to me?"

But the law was not amused. "Kaley Shah", he said sardonically, 'your belly is stuffed full with silver. It would outweigh even the dirt in your heart!'

The constable's words rattled like a sack of empty cans in his head and prevented him from sleeping.

"You have a guest", said Fatimah as she brought him his tumbler of hot, steaming milk next morning. "It is Najab. He stayed the night in the cattle shed." For a moment he was terrified. A smuggler in the house, the police prowling all around and he did not even

know of it! His meeting with Najab had been brief. The wretched fellow had brought no *tendu* leaf.

“First you come unannounced, dragging the police behind you, and then I find you have come with nothing. Trading with you is going to be a dead loss, son, with the cops on your back and your hands empty.”

Najab thought that Kaley Shah’s waist cloth, with its black and white checks looked like a chess board. He would have to make his moves carefully. He showed the gold bracelet. “I have come for the cloves, *Chacha jaan*. And I shall pay in gold.”

The next two days Kaley Shah was busy buying cloves and arranging to get Allaharakha grazed a few miles away, by a cowherd. Otherwise the presence of a strange camel would have let loose a babble of tongues. Najab slept in the cattle-shed in the evening and slipped into Fatimah’s room late at night.

“They want me to marry Mahfuz Ali”, she told him. “He is related to us from my mother’s family. The way he stammers! You should hear him! Urchins start mimicking him the moment they set eyes on him. It is just a step removed from being hounded like a madman and pelted with stones.”

“Has it never occurred to you to take a ride on Allaharakha across the Rann?” She had kept silent and silence was assent. It was as simple as that.

The first lurch of the camel next evening and they were off. He had waited with his camel at the outskirts of the village and she had slipped out after her father had started snoring. The moment was too big for them and they did not speak. It was only in passing that she thought of the village she was leaving for good. As for quitting one country and entering another, she never gave it a thought. Where did one have the time for Pakistan and Hindustan when one was eloping with one’s love and crossing the desert which divided, both physically and symbolically, the two countries? For her it meant just a shift in dialect, a smear of Kutchi added and a little of Sindhi sandpapered away.

And the camel lurched and bumped onwards and Najab drove him hard. By the time they reached Sarbela she was exhausted and fell asleep.

She woke up in the afternoon to find the sky overcast. It turned ominous in the evening with depth upon depth of dark-edged nimbus gathering at the summons of a storm-god. Another night they journeyed facing the wind which hurled the sand in their faces. As they neared Khavda, the thunder started rolling and reverberating across the skies.

Three times during the night Aftab had opened the door, thinking his son had come. But it was only the wind knocking against the door. This time the banging was persistent. When he unlatched the door he found Allaharakha shying away from a streak of lightening. Huge, isolated drops of rain were falling, kicking up the dust. Aftab steeled himself. He would not allow any relief, any expression of joy to show on his face.

“Son, have you brought anything?” he asked, an edge of iron deliberately introduced into voice.

“Yes”, he replied, as he ushered Fatimah in.

The rain stormed down and swept away three years of drought.

About the story :

The story ‘Love Across the Salt Desert’ narrates the triumph of human will and determination. Every individual is capable of achieving remarkable feats provided he has a strong will to do so.

GLOSSARY

drought (n)	:	a long period when there is little or no rain
stricken (adj)	:	suffering severely from the effect of something unpleasant
scab (n)	:	rough surface made of dried blood which forms over a cut, broken skin while it is healing
chunks (n)	:	a roughly cut piece
emaciated (adj)	:	very weak and thin usually because of illness or extreme hunger
omen (n)	:	something that is considered to be a sign of how a future event will take place (both a good omen and a bad omen)
gobbled up (v)	:	ate food too fast while making a noise in the throat, swallowed hastily
trudged (v)	:	walked slowly with a lot of effort especially over a difficult surface or while carrying something heavy
reclusive (adj)	:	a person who lives alone and avoids any company or talking to other people
squander (v)	:	spend or use money in supplies in a wasteful way, or to waste opportunities by not using them

diffidence (n)	:	shy and not confident of abilities
introvert (n)	:	someone who is quiet and speaks less or who is concerned with his or her thoughts and feelings than the outside world
veteran (n)	:	a person who has had a lot of experience of a particular activity having been involved in a particular activity for a long time
tinge (n)	:	a very slight amount of a colour or of a feeling
elicit (v)	:	bring about or draw out a response or reaction
slurred (v)	:	pronounced badly and wrongly, spoke in an unclear way
grotesque (adj)	:	very odd and ugly
stammer (n)	:	sounds in a speech which has unusual pauses or repetitions of syllables
fury (n)	:	wild anger; uncontrolled violence
chagrin (n)	:	disappointment or anger, especially when caused by a failure or mistake (also annoyance)
fledgling (n)	:	new and without experience
shambling (v)	:	walking very slowly and awkwardly without lifting one's feet
corrugated (adj)	:	a sheet of iron or cardboard shaped into folds
mirage (n)	:	a hope or wish that has no chance of being achieved; an image seems to be far away but does not exist
fatigue (n)	:	extreme tiredness
succumbed (v)	:	lost the determination to oppose something, to accept defeat
Odyssey (n)	:	a long exciting journey
leviathan (n)	:	a sea animal
lumbering (adj)	:	moving slowly, heavily and awkwardly
callus (n)	:	an area of hard thickened skin especially on the feet or hands
lustrous (adj)	:	a quality of being shiny with bright light

sardonically (adv)	:	showing little respect to a person and making fun in an unkind way just because one thinks that he or she is very important
lurch (v)	:	to move in a way that is not regular or normal or to make sudden movements backwards or forward
ushered (v)	:	showed someone where he or she should go or made someone go
Nimbus (n)	:	A dark grey cloud which often produces rain
reverberating (v)	:	a loud deep sound that continues to echo or resound or heard around an area

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS :

A. Choose the correct alternative:

- Drought in Kutch had lasted for
 (a) five years (b) one year
 (c) three years (d) two years
- Whenever Najab and his father crossed Rann earlier each time they had taken----- with them.
 (a) tea leaf (b) herbal leaf
 (c) green leaf (d) tendu leaf
- The relationship between Kaley Shah and Fatimah was
 (a) brother-sister (b) husband-wife
 (c) teacher-student (d) father-daughter
- The name of Najab's camel was
 (a) Janbaz (b) Allaharakha
 (c) Aftab (d) Tabeez

B. Answer the following questions in 30-40 words each:

- Why did the Rann look like 'a paralyzed monster'?
- What important incident occurred when Fatimah came into the village?
- Why did Fatimah not like Mahfuz Ali?
- Why did Aftab open the door three times during the night? Was anybody knocking at the door?

5. Why was it not easy to cross the boundary? How were people checked while crossing the border?
6. Why was Fatimah happy despite she was leaving her country as well as home?

C. Answer the following questions in 115-125 words each:

1. Discuss the aptness of the title 'Love across the Salt Desert'?
2. Write about the rituals performed at Panchmai Pir.
3. The image of Rann has been used twice in this story: in the beginning and also in the end. How was it associated with love, joy and harmony among the characters?
4. Throw light on the difference of attitude between Najab's mother and father when they came to know about his escapade.
5. What difficulties did Najab face while crossing the border?

D. State True or False:

1. 'Chagal' was used to drinking water. (True/False)
2. The Spice-seller had a beautiful son. (True/False)
3. Najab succeeded in crossing the border. (True/False)
4. Najab's mother knew about his escapade. (True/False)
5. Kaley Shah helped Najab in taking his daughter away. (True/False)

E. Creative Writing :

Imagine you are a member of the drought relief team. Describe the measures you would take to help the drought stricken people in a remote desert area.