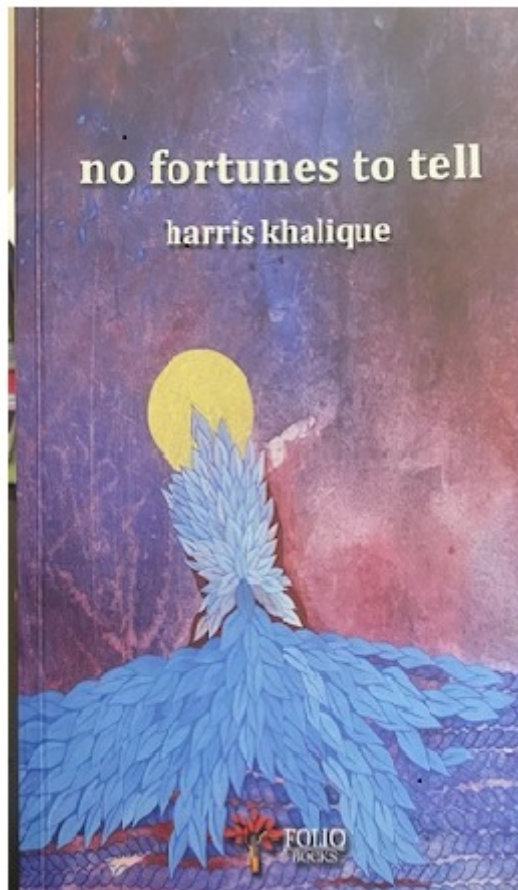


REVIEW

A Haunting Refraction of Proxy Wars: A Review of Harris Khalique's "no fortunes to tell"

by Seher Hashmi



Well-known in the echelons of South Asian literati, Harris Khalique is a thorough-bred academic, illustrious poet, literary critic and a proactive proponent of human rights from Pakistan. With an impressive body of work, comprising five collections of Urdu poetry, four titles of English poetry and two books of non-fiction on political history and discourse in Pakistan, Harris has been appraised widely for his social activism in defence of human rights in South Asia. Hitting the shelves in 2019, *no fortunes to tell*, fifth to his oeuvre, is reflective of his lifetime commitment to human rights, the violations of which is the dominant theme of the book.

no fortunes to tell: An Archive in Free Verse

no fortunes to tell reads like a poetic archive of the terror attacks that ripped apart Southwestern Asia after 2011 — the most vicious period of recent history. Beginning the poetic reportage with “The palm reader: Aleppo,” the poet reports from the scene of the blast that “the corpses will remain / scattered / till the following day / neighbourhood cordoned off” where the palm reader sets out to do his job — “he would read the palms of dead” — and rounds it off with “many palms to read / no fortunes to tell.” This icy imagery evokes frigid indifference at the loss of human life — an anathema proxy wars leave behind. Archiving how berserk things went in the period between 2011 to 2018 in Southwest Asia, “In the heart of darkness” records the travesty of values: “I come from a land / where darkness is not evil, light is / men lynched / women stoned to death.”

Anomalous to Classical Epic



"no fortunes to tell" © Seher Hashmi

The collection contains 26 poems, feeding off each other's themes, interlinked with a unity of theme: the ravages of wars. Another analogy to the classical epic is its narrative style employing myriad dramatic personas to further the story. However, the parallel does not

proceed any further.

As uncanny as Harris's spare diction, the title in lower case is emblematic of an inversion of the literary traditions of classical poetry on wars. Following in the footsteps of bell hooks, an

American poet and social critic known for her radical approach to language, Harris Khalique commences his poetics in lower case, flagging how low the deterioration of human condition in war-torn regions of Aleppo, Yemen, Kashmir and Waziristan has hit. *no fortune to tell* emaciates battles and warriors of their epical glory, reporting on their fatal ramifications on innocent civilians, especially children:

Yemen 2018

The sortie succeeded
his father is at rest
the boy keeps tugging
the blood soaked vest.

Building on the anomaly, there is nothing singular or heroic about the protagonists or the personas assumed in the poems of *no fortunes to tell*. Instead it narrates the collective doom of a community of many antiheroes. An ordinary palm reader from Aleppo, Syria, who “had squeezed himself / under a large trunk / of fresh potatoes / when they came and opened fire,” initiates the doomed haul in a war-torn landscape.

Several other poems map out the ordeal of the antiheroes: A poor boy carries his mother's body, decapitated after a blast, to a magician saying, “you had cut / a woman in half / put her back,” so mend my mother too, “she is only cut in half”; Gulsher, a 13-year-old victim of the 2016 terror attack in Peshawar, Pakistan, “from school today / he came back in hearse”; condemned to solitary confinement for nine years on falsified conviction of blasphemy, which got quashed later, Asia Bibi worries for her children and mulls over “what death brings.”

Instead of fetishising heroism associated with battles, Harris’s matter-of-fact language strips them of it. Evoking emotions of fright and fear, *no fortunes to tell* knocks the wind out. Harris’s reportage-like narration and his peculiar angle on impoverishment of war flip the table on the grand and lofty that a classical epic boasts of, giving the readers every reason to assume that it is an anti-epic on the detritus of terrorism and anarchy of proxy wars. The anti-epic ventures on reflecting the impoverishment proxy wars inflict on societies where

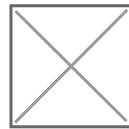
“the rich man and his friends / belittle his son / for feeling embarrassed” for he raped “the peasant's wife.”

Implied by the title, the motif of witchcraft — diversion from reason and rationality — runs through in almost all the poems alluding that South West Asia seemed possessed in the timespan between 2011 to 2018. When “the playboy” and “the sorceress” consummate their marriage, not taking vows but chanting curses — “confundo / incendio / imperio” — ill omens appear: “packs of wolves / on plateaus and plains” are seen “howling at the moon.”

In Waziristan, Pakistan, a youth approaches a magician asking for a spell which would join the two halves of his mother's body torn by a blast. In this ravished landscape, time is hexed and people are cursed; in “Still Waters,” the dead eyes of Zainab Asari — a child victim of rape and murder — reflect the “wrath, curse, dread” she experienced before dying.

Harris’s angle is a departure from epical tradition of romanticising valour conflated with shedding blood. And yet there is something of epical stature in the defiance of devotees who keep the dhamaal going

“chanting names / of the twelve infallible men” after a deadly blast at a shrine in Sehwan Sharif. Insha — a teen shot in her eyes with a pellet gun in Srinagar, Kashmir — embodies a resilience of epical proportion too:



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she may never see again
though
she will always be able
to dream.

Ghastly Imagery in Icy Diction

Harris's caustic syntax and ghastly images are cut out for evoking fright in his reader. Appalled by the incessant bomb blasts followed by innumerable burial processions in "Burying Martyrs," the poet reckons:

We turn into a funeral procession
all.

"And martyrs are light" the fallacy of martyrdom comes spiralling out undone, "the one we carry / are heavy / they have metal inside / bullets, shrapnels, pellets, nails."

These steely images in bland, dispassionate diction conjure up the absurdity of such uncalled-for loss without falling for the elegiac trope of exaggerated emotions. The overall effect is that of out-and-out horror and detachment of human emotions numbed by theatrics of proxy wars.

Neither an Elegy Nor a Requiem

However, the poet's dismay is immune to mawkish diction and elegiac cadence. *no fortune to tell* is neither a lament nor a repose. Sourcing in his commitment to the factual and acuity of a veteran journalist, Harris opts for registering the story with the liminal perception of a poet.

In "Remains," after the massacre people are left with nothing to bury but scattered body parts: "an arm cannot be made from a leg / fingers from toes / a child torso."

It is in this contrast to an elegy while running parallel to an epic in an anomalous fashion that *no fortunes to tell* stands tall, carving out a niche of its own.