

# The Arsonist



# The Arsonist

Poet, weaver, seer, blasphemer

Kiran Nagarkar

 juggernaut

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Nobody knows for certain when exactly the Bhakti saint Kabir was born. But the fact is Kabir is timeless. Which is why he is always timely. He is the contemporary of every age. And his time is forever 'now'.

He was illiterate. And yet his dohas, as his poems were called, are beyond literate. They are the very essence of wisdom, often the opposite of received wisdom. The most curious thing about him is a separate oeuvre of his which introduces a radical surrealism into his meditations on God. His mordant wit, his sense of irony, sees through it all: life and death, faith and God, the banal and the profound, the spiritual and the mortal. His observations, his insights and his commentary on every aspect of our term on earth make us question our most revered beliefs and the humbug that often passes for religion or philosophy.

This book found itself being written because every now and then the ghastly things that were happening in Kabir's own country, India, and across the world compelled me to ask how he would have responded to events that were occurring centuries after his death: the lynchings, the hate campaigns, the loss of humanity, sanity and compassion; the stupendous double-and-triple talk; the bottomless greed and mendacity; the wars, riots and ceaseless violence. The endless mass murders in the name of God and religion. And the wilful ignoring of the very real possibility of the extinction of mankind itself.

Would Kabir have managed to shake us awake and rise?



# 1

‘If you had to choose between a woman you loved and God, who would you choose?’

And the Weaver said, ‘The woman. Is there any doubt about that?’

And the mullah asked him, ‘If you had to choose between a song and God, what would you pick?’

And the Weaver said, ‘The song, of course.’

And the priest from the temple asked him, ‘Weaver, if perforce you had to choose one or the other, a beautiful sunset or God, what would your choice be?’

And he said, ‘Isn’t it obvious? The sunset.’

And they asked him how he could blaspheme so.

And the Weaver said, ‘Why sirs, God has eternity on his side, he can always wait. Will the woman, the song or the sunset wait for me?’

And they asked in desperation, ‘If you had to choose between sin and God, Weaver, what would you choose?’

And he laughed and said, ‘Sin, always sin. Sin is fun, sin is forbidden, sin is, what shall I say, so sinful. They should forbid God as they forbid sin, then maybe he would become far more attractive and we would all be drawn to him.’

‘What a bunch of buffoons you have for your devotees, oh Lord,’ he laughed out loud. ‘The fools would sever you from your creation.’

Kabir yeh ghar prem ka,  
Khaala ka ghar naahi.  
Sheesh utaare bhuin dharey,  
Tab paithe ghar maahi.

Kabir, this is the dwelling of love,  
Not the home of your aunt.  
Bend your head (ego) low, all the way to the floor,  
Only then can you enter it.



## 2

One afternoon when the Weaver was taking his siesta, two of his pupils, Ismael and Ananda, rushed into the house and woke him up.

‘I hope you’ve found God or something as important, Ananda. For if you haven’t, I’m going to beat the living daylights out of you.’

‘Is it true—’ Ananda was still out of breath, ‘that you were an ascetic and lived alone in the mountains?’

‘Is that why you woke me up, you fool?’

‘Answer the question, Master,’ Ismael said tersely.

The other apprentices left their looms and gathered around the Weaver.

‘Oh, I don’t remember. It was such a long time ago. And how does it concern you, anyway?’

‘No ascetic with any self-respect would ever return to a normal life or go back to his wife,’ Ismael sneered.

‘I guess I have no self-respect. Now may I go back to my nap?’

‘Why, why would you come back when you were supposed to be the greatest maharishi in the country?’

‘Can’t we talk about it some other time?’

‘Now,’ the pupils said impatiently.

The Master sat up and shook his head in disbelief and resignation. ‘Who is the Master here? You or me?’

They laughed and Ananda said, ‘We don’t know about you but we outnumber you thirty to one. So I guess we must be the boss-men here.’

The Master said:

When I was your age, I set out in search of God. Not small- or medium-sized gods but the big one, the Almighty Himself. I was a pretty persistent sort and over the years I acquired a reputation as a holy man. They called me a sage and a seer. Some said I was a siddha and had miraculous powers.

I lived in the Himalayas in those days, some fourteen thousand feet above sea level. It was my seventh year of standing on one leg. My eyes were closed and my mind was focused on Brahman. People from far and near, from neighbouring principalities and distant kingdoms, trekked to the mountains to fall at my feet and receive my blessings. Sometimes they would wait for days, even weeks, to see me, for there was no telling how long my devotions and meditations would last.

Why do people go to see holy men? Because they believe the enlightened ones can make God bend down all the way from heaven to lend an ear. For them a sage is a go-between, a middleman, and, who knows, God may be on the take. But I promised nothing. If I had, as was rumoured, magical powers, I was keeping them to myself. And yet they kept coming, an endless march of pilgrims,

the rich and the poor, men, women and children, the lame and the halt and the handicapped, those who needed their lives fixed and those who needed nothing. They came to sit in the shadow of saintliness and be touched by someone who, for all they knew, was privy to God's thoughts.

One day the blacksmith's wife from a nearby village came to see me with her son. He was of an indeterminate age, he could have been twenty-five or maybe he was close to forty. His mouth was open and there was a vacuous smile on his face.

'Don't just stand there, you fool. Touch the Master's feet,' the mother snapped at him.

He bent down and lay prostrate in front of me, his hands joined prayerfully for a full five minutes.

'Bless him, Master,' the mother said. 'I've seven daughters and one son. His name is Suraj. He's a good boy and his heart is in the right place but he's a little simple. He's slow to learn and gets a beating from his father almost every week.'

'Tell the blacksmith to beat iron and not the boy,' I told her. The simple of heart, I suspect, are closer to God than all the subtle scholars of the world. 'Rise, my son.' I put my hand on his head. 'May God be with you.'

'Likewise,' Suraj said and laughed as if he had said something vastly funny.

He would come by from time to time and watch me from a distance. I would forget him and then hours later realize that he was still staring at me.

It was the beginning of February and a cold, nasty wind was blowing, the one they call the Intruder. It whistled inside your bones and froze your blood. The blacksmith's

son came up to me and wrapped a shawl around my shoulders.

‘I thank you for your kindness,’ I told him, ‘but I must return your gift, for I have vowed that whatever the season, however inclement the weather, I will endure it.’

The blacksmith’s son looked puzzled. ‘Why would you do this, Master?’

‘A small token,’ I said, smiling self-deprecatingly, ‘of my devotion to God.’

‘I have brought you some bread that my mother made and raw chillies. They’ll bring warmth to your shivering body.’

‘That is kind of you, Suraj. I’m touched by your concern but I’ll not touch food for the next three weeks.’

‘And why would you do this, Master? Are you unwell?’

‘Nothing of the sort,’ I said. ‘Just another small token of my affection for the Almighty.’

‘Does it give God pleasure then when people starve or freeze to death?’ he asked innocently. ‘Is that why people scourge themselves?’

‘Oh no, no. The good Lord doesn’t ask anything of us. It’s just a way of showing my love for him.’

‘Is that why you stand on one leg?’

‘Yes, that is the very reason.’

‘You have a rather funny way of showing your love, Master. For if God wanted us to be one-legged, he wouldn’t have given us two.’

I smiled at his naivety but decided to humour him. ‘Maybe you’ve got a point there.’

‘What else have you given up, Master?’

‘Not much really. I shaved my head, left my young wife

and my child of two months. And my elderly parents. They didn't want me to go since I was their only child and the sole breadwinner. "Who will run the workshop and who'll look after us?" they asked.'

'God will,' I told them. 'He takes care of his own.'

'What workshop? Are you too an iron-master?'

'No. I was Chief Weaver by appointment to His Majesty. All the princesses and queens wore fabrics woven on my looms.'

'All this you gave up? No wonder they call you maharishi.'

'Just a trifle. Nothing more. I bade farewell to my job as the village mukhiya. The villagers said, "Who will save us when the floods come and who will listen to our troubles?"

'And I told them that power is an unquenchable thirst, and high office a pair of shackles. I will have nothing to do with them. Everything I had desired, I parted with.'

'Surely then you must part with the Almighty too.'

I laughed and asked him, 'Pray, why should I part with the Almighty?'

'Because you desire God more than anything else in the world.'

I was nonplussed. Was this man just stupid or was he the devil incarnate? 'You think that I would forsake the most precious thing in my life?' I spoke with suppressed rage.

The blacksmith's son fell at my feet and clung to my ankles. 'Mercy, Master, have mercy on me. I will not get up till you've forgiven an ignorant man with a loose tongue.'

'Rise blacksmith,' I said, 'I bear you no ill will.'

'Your love of God is indeed great, Master. Greater than

any other man's,' the blacksmith's son said and bowed. 'I'll take your leave now.'

'May God be with you,' I said.

He never showed up again. It was I who visited him some months later. He was in the smithy and cleared some cast-iron scrap off a bench to make room for me to sit and asked his mother to get me a glass of buttermilk.

'What can I do for you, Master?' he asked me.

'Will you be my teacher, my guru?'

'Me?' He seemed astounded by the suggestion.

'Yes. You have more wisdom than all my years of searching for the Almighty have given me. You taught me that one can get a little too attached to selflessness. You taught me that at the end of the day a man must renounce renunciation itself.'

The blacksmith smiled. 'I taught you, Master? You are pulling my leg.'

'I'm not,' I told him emphatically. 'I've never been more serious. Be my guru.'

He laughed then, a loud guffaw that shook the smithy. 'You've got to be joking,' he said. 'Do you think I've nothing better to do?'

Ja ghat prem na sancharey,  
So ghat jaan masaan,  
Jaise khaal lohar ki,  
Saans let bin praan.

That pot which is not filled with love,  
Beware, it is as barren as the burial grounds,  
Just like the blacksmith's bellows,  
It breathes bereft of life.

### 3

Shantaprasad Chaturvedi was not happy. In truth he had been highly upset for the last eight months. As his surname told you, he not only belonged to the highest class of Brahmins, he knew all the four Vedas. Not just that, he knew them better than anybody else in the country and could recite them front to back and back to front even when he was running a temperature of 105 and was delirious. There was not a day when he didn't get up at five in the morning to take a dip in the Jamuna after he had finished his other morning ablutions. When he got back to the Weaver's workshop in Shantipura, the capital of the state of Panchananda, he spent the next hour and a half bathing the family gods, doing pooja, and praying to them.

Like most of the other disciples, Shantaprasad had enrolled in Kabir's studio because he was considered the finest weaver in the country. But that was not all, the Weaver was also known to be the ultimate repository of wisdom. Shantaprasad, however, was no longer so sure about his choice of a master-weaver. As a matter of fact he was certain that the Weaver was perverse and an unrepentant heretic. He was bent on destroying all the traditional values that

had made the country great. But enough was enough. Just because the Weaver was eccentric and spoke in conundrums didn't mean that he could get away with destroying the very fabric of Hinduism.

Shantaprasad Chaturvedi got up even earlier that day, finished his prayers and woke the Master up.

'Ah Shantaprasad, to what do I owe the great privilege of being woken up by no less a personage than one whose family and he himself have mastered all the four Vedas?'

'There's something which has been bothering me since the time that I joined your workshop.'

'This is most unfortunate. Why have you waited so long? Tell me what it is and I will do everything in my power to help you. You know very well that I cannot bear to see any of my pupils unhappy.'

'You have untouchables working here.'

'Yes, and some of them are exceptionally gifted.'

'That's what I was coming to. The untouchables are not here to do their traditional duties like cleaning up our, how should I put it delicately, our waste matter, or cart the dead bodies of our cattle away and skin them. They work at the looms alongside us. Mind you, I make sure not even their shadow pollutes me.'

'That is truly admirable,' the Weaver said though Shantaprasad was not quite sure whether the Master was pulling his leg.

'Thank you, but I fail to understand why you break the laws sanctified by our holiest books, the Manusmriti, the Puranas and the Bhagavad Gita, and allow the filthy shudras inside the workshop.'



‘I mean no disrespect to your great learning,’ I told him, ‘but you do know that they are admitted to heaven too.’

‘What absolute rubbish. What would they be doing in the residence of the gods?’

‘I understand your anxiety and anger. But would you be happier if the divine beings arranged for a separate enclosure for them?’

‘Of course not. What business do they have up there in the holiest of holies?’

‘Well, the gods as you can imagine, like to welcome all the good folks to their heavenly abode. But they are rather particular about ensuring that this most wholesome of places in the universe remains the sanctuary of perfect bliss. So obviously it stands to reason that when someone had to get rid of trash like you who think God came up with the idea of a caste system, He begged the very people whom you so glibly called untouchables to throw the likes of you out of heaven.’

Kabir kuaan ek hai,  
Panihaari anek,  
Bartan sab ke nyare nyare,  
Paani sab mein ek.

Kabir there is but one well,  
But many draw water from it,  
The pots come in all shapes and sizes,  
But all contain the same water.

That morning they were trying to do a warp and woof count for a complicated woven fabric for Shyamsundar Purohit's son's thread ceremony bash when Jalaluddin, the new apprentice, interrupted the tricky calculations with an odd question. 'Some people say you are a Hindu, others insist you are a Muslim. Who are you?'

'Thanks for the break, Jalal.' The Weaver heaved a sigh of relief. 'I find the maths in weaving exhausting. Who am I, you ask. Good question. Unfortunately let's just say I'm confused. I'm half and half, something like a chhakka or a eunuch of religion.'

'It's a simple enough question with a one-word answer.'

'It might be a bit more complicated than that. I think the more relevant question might be what is God's religion? Is He Muslim? Christian? Hindu? Jewish? Jain? The Buddha himself, I'm told, ignored the Almighty altogether. Is it any wonder then that the good Lord must be going through a severe identity crisis? The poor guy doesn't have a clue about who he is. He's utterly confused. Imagine, He spends sleepless nights wondering whether He's a Roman Catholic, a Protestant, a Hindu Brahmin or a shudra, a Jew, a Parsi,

or a Muslim; debating whether he's a Shia or a Sunni; a Buddhist or a Moonie. Or if he exists at all, does he have a form, human or divine? Or is he formless?

'His plight is truly tragic. Think about it, the Hindus were trying to undo the all-encompassing hold of the Buddhists in the name of their own gods. What better way to wipe them out, the Hindu kings figured, than to start wantonly destroying Buddhist iconic sites. Imagine, Shashank, a seventh-century monarch, chopped down the Bodhi tree under which the Buddha received enlightenment. Pushyamitra Shunga not only wiped out the Mauryan Buddhist dynasty but he also knocked down the Ashokan pillared hall and Kukutaram monastery in Pataliputra. He didn't just stop there, he smashed and wrecked the Sanchi stupa itself.

'Needless to say, there were innumerable attacks on Buddhist temples and stupas over the decades. No less an authority than the great Patanjali of the Yoga Sutras compared the relationship between the Buddhists and Jains on the one hand and the Hindus on the other as that between a snake and a mongoose. I need hardly add that the Buddhists retaliated, despite their sworn allegiance to the creed of ahimsa or non-violence. But as was often the case, Hinduism had the last word. One of its branches swallowed the Buddha whole by making him one of the ten avatars of the god Vishnu.

'There was, however, a new faith on the horizon. Islam. Its followers were even more fanatical and many a time the marauding Muslims razed Hindu temples and massacred thousands of the locals.

'How times have changed. Things have indeed come

full circle. The Sri Lankan and the Burmese Buddhists, not to mention the Hindutva fanatics, seem to think that murdering Muslims is an article of faith laid down by the Enlightened One himself. As to the Jains, they won't harm even the tiniest living creature and yet I can hardly think of any other community whose intolerance is often worse than overt violence. The good Christians have been persecuting Jews for crucifying Jesus, the Son of God, for centuries. And then when Christianity bifurcated, the Catholics and the Protestants tried to wipe out each other.

'As you can see, the good Lord has good reason to be bloody confused. I think for the time being we should just let Him take care of himself and sort things out. Till then I prefer being a human being, one of those without a label. Not the dead sort bumped off in His name though. But just someone who's allowed to breathe freely and live and let live.

'As you have just seen, all religions seem to have a murderous streak in them. But have you noticed one other thing? There's a common factor here: God ends up as the mass murderer in every faith.'

Man ke mate na chaliye,  
 Man ke mate anek.  
 Jo man par aswaar ho,  
 So sadhu koi ek.

Don't let the mind lead you,  
 It's pulled in every direction by desires.  
 The one who rides his mind,  
 Now that is a rare saint.

‘Everybody wants a guru to show them the way,’ the Weaver said. ‘It’s not such a bad idea, I suppose. You may not be able to see without a guru. But then, more often than not, you cannot see beyond the guru either. The guru is vision and the guru is blinkers. It is easy to forget that one is not searching for the guru but for God. Once you’ve found a guru and understood his teachings, it’s time to think of leaving him and making your own way.

‘If I could teach you anything,’ he told his pupils and apprentices, ‘I would teach you irreverence. Irreverence towards your guru, irreverence towards all and sundry, but most of all irreverence towards yourself and your solemnities.

‘I may have found the true path, if such a thing exists, but the truth, like all of us, has a short lifespan. Somebody must then find another path, and another truth. And the one will not cancel the other.’

Boond samaani samand mein,  
 Jaanat hai har koi,  
 Samand samaana boond mein,  
 Jaanat birla joi.

The drop becomes one with the ocean,  
Everyone knows this,  
It's the rare soul who grasps,  
That the ocean fits into the drop.

## 6

It was curious how often heaven and paradise were hotly discussed and debated at the Weaver's workshop in Shantipura, the thriving capital city of the kingdom of Panchananda. The apprentices were mostly in their late teens, and regardless of the fact that they belonged to different faiths, their bonding was intense. And on the rare occasion when there was a flood or some dreadful calamity, they stood as one and often risked their own lives to save a classmate or colleague. But when the talk veered to paradise or hell, the camaraderie suffered a drastic setback and often serious fights broke out.

'Saeed says those who follow Islam have access to seven orders of jannats,' an overwrought Abhishek told the Master, 'each one more beguiling and tempting than the previous ones. Which means we Hindus will be packed into just one swarg even though we are nine times their population. How come they have so much more space than we do? We are the larger community by far. So our heaven should be nine times the Muslim one. One other thing, as the larger community we should have the best locations.'

'You've got it all wrong,' Saeed retorted before the Master

could respond. 'We have just as many jehannums as heavens, each one more terrible than the previous one. All of you infidels and idolators, Christians, Jews, Buddhists and Jains, will go to the seventh hell. It's all there in black and white in the Quran. The angel Jibrael himself revealed all this to the Prophet.' The other apprentice weavers had left their looms and gathered around the two disciples, listening intently to the heated discussion.

'What rot.' Abhishek's fist made contact with Saeed's chin and felled him. 'Our holy books spoke about heaven thousands of years before your Quran did.'

'How dare you contradict the Prophet?' Saeed bounced up and lit into Abhishek. Within minutes it was a free-for-all. The Weaver watched the proceedings with keen interest. When matters began to get out of hand, he cleared his throat loudly several times. Since none of the combatants paid him any heed, he went over to the dyeing tank and filled a large bucket with deep purple water and flung it at his assistants. 'Forgive me for interrupting such a crucial controversy about our afterlife but, Saeed, I'm not quite sure you've got your facts right. The Shias won't admit any Sunnis in their jannat and neither will the Sunnis let the Shias in. The same goes for Catholics and Protestants. Perhaps I should also add a footnote to that. This morning's breaking news said that deadly territorial wars had been going on for the past seventy million years amongst the various heavens and their bosses. Mind you there's no dearth of space there since you can't measure infinity.

'There's one other wrinkle to the problem. With earthlings like you and me, even if we can never reach a settlement, the conflicts are likely to peter out or cease



altogether because fortunately we are all of us time-bound and, like it or not, will be terminated. But since all the residents in the various heavens are immortals, this is a permanent world war.'

Patthar puje hari miley,  
Toh main puju pahad,  
Taase toh chaaki bhali,  
Pees khaaye sansar.

If one found God by worshipping a stone,  
Then I would worship a mountain,  
By that measure a grinding stone is far better,  
The whole world consumes what it grinds.

The Master was in great form today. It was Lord Shiva's birthday and along with his students he had already had three glasses of thandai, the milk drink with bhang which the god himself loved to quaff. It gave you a lovely high and made you feel well disposed even towards your enemies. They were sitting on patchwork quilts spread on two dozen charpoys. The coir strings on the cots had been restrung tightly just a few days back, and when someone got up to go take a leak or stretch his legs, you could have played noughts and crosses on his criss-crossed bottom.

The Master was in a 'those were the days' mood and reminiscing about his childhood and how he had given his parents a hard time when he learnt that he was a foundling.

'I was a pretty smart kid even then. Perhaps mean or nasty might be a more accurate description. If I didn't have my way, I made a scene. I mean the whole village could hear me as I screamed that my foster parents had kidnapped me from my mother's lap and I was about to report them to the police. They were simple folk. Just the mention of the police would frighten them and they would cave in to my wishes.'

‘Why did your real mother abandon you?’ Devendra enquired. He seemed to want to take the matter up with the Weaver’s biological mother, wherever she was.

‘No mother is given to getting rid of her child unless she is in dire straits. Or unless her child is the devil himself. I suspect I qualified for the latter and made her life impossible. My foster parents, however, went to great lengths to portray my mother as a visionary Sibyl. They claimed she put me in a wicker basket because she foresaw me as an incarnation of Moses, who as you may recall was sent down the river in the same manner.’

‘Some Moses you turned out to be.’ Bismillah snorted. ‘We hear you were a real ladies’ man. The stone tablets you brought back from the mountain must have had an extra commandment saying “Thou shalt not keep thy hands off any woman.”’

‘No, no no,’ the Master roared, smiling modestly at the same time. ‘It was the other way round. The ladies couldn’t keep their hands off me. And of course since I was a chivalrous gentleman, I had no option but to oblige.’

‘Oh poor you, how you toiled and suffered doing so much social work,’ Bismillah retaliated.

‘You won’t believe this but I was perpetually on call. There were times when two, even three, ladies wanted my services simultaneously. I remember it was the rakhi festival when the zamindar’s wife, the military commander’s daughter-in-law and the priest’s daughter came to visit me, saying they wanted to tie a rakhi on my wrist and declare themselves my sisters. So I stretched out my hand, and the first thing they did was untie my salwar. I remember protesting that this would amount to incest. They were shocked that I

should interpret pure sisterly love in this fashion and got on top of me.'

'And what about your wife?' Inayat was in charge of the drinks and he made sure that the Weaver's glass was not allowed to stand empty.

'What about her?' The Master countered Inayat's question with one of his own, suspecting that he was needling him.

'How did she respond to your philandering?'

'What choice did she have?' The Weaver was getting more than a little shirty. 'I'm the man of the manor, the breadwinner. She had no choice but to do my bidding.'

'Is that why she threw you out of the house?' Inayat asked archly.

The Master threw the glass of thandai at his oldest pupil but Inayat ducked his head and the missile missed its mark and splintered on the ground. 'How dare you insult your Guru? I have half a mind to sack you from your post and let you starve.'

Inayat knew the Master's temper was nothing but hot air but he pretended to be contrite and fell at the Weaver's feet and rolled on the ground begging for forgiveness.

'Spare us the melodrama, Inayat,' the Master ticked off his pupil. 'You are a bad actor and a worse ham. Get me another glass of thandai.'

'Now that you've exposed me,' the Master said as he sipped the thandai, 'I guess I have no option but to tell the truth.'

'My wife Kashmiri was an illiterate woman and it was easy for me to think of her as infinitely inferior to me and look down upon her. Rather late in life I discovered that literacy or scholarship rarely signify wisdom.'

‘Can we skip the profound philosophical ruminations and just get to the point, Master?’ Inayat was not about to let the Master off the hook.

‘Sometimes I wonder who is the Master here and who the pupil. It was the same with my wife. It took me time to learn that she was the one who wore the pants in the family. But lest you tick me off again, let me tell you how I was kicked out of the house. I was coming back home one morning after a night of revelry. I was still a little high and in a good humour and singing a ditty: “Why, oh why is there daylight / All I want is the night / A woman on my left and another on the right.” I was at the gate in our compound wall when I saw my wife coming out from our house with a man in tow and bidding him goodbye.

‘I was suddenly wide awake. “Who’s that?” I asked sharply.

“That, my dear, is one of my lovers.”

“One? Are there others?”

‘I looked at the man closely. I couldn’t believe my eyes. It was the kind of coincidence that only a writer of the most trashy stories would dare to pen. He was the husband of the woman I had been with all night long. What was this? A fair exchange programme?

“Am I to understand that you have been entertaining another man while I’ve been away?”

“Yes. You see I have an excellent teacher,” my wife retorted.

“Who’s that?”

“You,” she said.

“Hey you, piss off.” I screamed at her companion who was still hanging around. “If I ever catch you with my wife again, I’ll skin you alive.”

‘I should have been a little more circumspect in my threat. The man was twice my size and he was all muscle and no fat.’

“Well,” the man said, “you are going to have to do a lot of skinning. Your wife is a connoisseur of men.” He was already advancing towards me. “Come to think of it, I should be the one peeling your skin off for ruining my reputation and turning my wife into a whore.”

‘My wife ran her hand over his back as if to calm him down. “Go home, Salim. The Weaver’s no match for you.” She laughed. “One whack of your backhand and he will be out for the count.”’

“Khuda hafiz, Kashmira. It’s been a night I will never forget. Any time you want me to come over, I’ll be more than happy to abandon whatever I’m doing and be in your arms.” He kissed my wife on her cheek and waved a cheery goodbye to me.

“How dare you show your face in public without your burqa? And that too in the presence of another man?”

“I don’t see you wearing a burqa in the presence of another woman. And I am sure you are not wearing one while you are fornicating either.”

“I’m a man. I don’t need to. The mullah at our mosque will vouch for that. He’ll tell you that the burqa is a paak woman’s identity. It is a pure woman’s armour and shield against the sinful gaze of men. A woman without a burqa is a whore and deserves to be stoned to death.”

“Oh really? Obviously it suits you that the barely literate mullah in our tiny town insists that the black burqa is our identity and how as paak women we must proudly exhibit it. But don’t forget, many of the scholars of the Quran insist that that’s absolute nonsense.

“The menfolk try to persuade us that seeing the world through a narrow aperture between the forehead and a little below the bridge of the nose is a wonderful gateway to the world. My blind sisters are only too happy to believe that God wills it so without ever grasping how unjust it is to the Almighty, and to all of us. Do you think God is so ashamed of his own creation that he needs to hide our faces? Do you know what the burqa is? It’s a coffin. Frankly I wouldn’t want even the dead to be buried in it either.

‘But I have not yet touched upon the most infuriating and utterly unfair burden we place upon the shoulders of two and three year old girls when we make them wear the hijab, telling these innocents that we are doing this for the greater glory of God.

“But let me clarify a few, what shall I call them, home truths, facts, whatever. There’s no mistaking my identity. It is the face that God and my parents gave me. No, nobody else in the world has my eyes, my nose, my delicate ears and my gorgeous lips that you love to lick and kiss. No man’s going to imprison me or my body in black. These pert boobs are mine and so are my nipples which you can’t have enough of. They are all God-given just as the vertical slit at the fork of my legs is and no man is going to tell me any different. A marriage is a covenant. Both husband and wife swear fidelity to their partner. When one party breaks the compact, the other too is free to engage with anyone he or she wishes.

‘I don’t believe in a tit-for-tat one-upmanship but I gave you a long rope to hang yourself by, Kabir. It didn’t occur to you that your neck would ever get caught in the noose, did it? What men want of course is that they should have all

the freedom in the world while their wives should be locked up at home and be grateful for being imprisoned. No more.

“This body is my property and I alone can and will decide what to do with it. Isn’t it marvellous that that same vertical line can be tightened and will keep out whoever it wants to keep out and yet grows large enough to let a newborn child out into the world? I rejoice in me.

“God is God because he does not discriminate. If He stands for all that is fair and just, he knows that it’s the menfolk who are perpetually ogling women and dying to get inside their skirts. And that’s why they keep the ladies in perpetual purdah. However, let me not overstate the case for the ladies. When they get going, they too can have a swinging time.

“I have heard the mullah say that in the old days women were never allowed to step out of the house and that it was sheer goodness on the part of the men to permit them to go out anywhere they wanted so long as they wore the burqa. Oh, the magnanimity of the menfolk. Thank you so much.

“Have any of the men, especially the mullahs, ever experienced the joys of being in that hothouse called a burqa, preferably a black one, for just a week? Forget the sweating or the terrible body odour, TBO for short, that issues from being encased in black in temperatures that fluctuate between 37 and 45 degrees centigrade. A week, however, would be enough for the men to also discover that there are far greater joys in the black robe like ghastly rashes, skin eruptions, and even better, the most disgusting skin diseases.

“If the menfolk had the least sense of decency, they would give women as much freedom as they themselves