

The Split Personality Disorder Syndrome in Faith and Ideology

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Anthony Burgess who is remembered mainly as the author of *The Clockwork Orange* and for Stanley Kubrick's movie version of it did a fairly effective hatchet job on a fellow-writer. He dismissed Graham Greene's work by referring to it as so much god-bothering. Whatever the facts of the matter, the phrase stuck like chewing gum in the hair.

If writers are subject to ups and downs when they are alive, they are even more so after they are dead. Greene's fortunes went into decline rapidly after his demise. For the last fifteen or more years it has been fashionable to talk of Greene as passé and a fuddy-duddy. Much of the credit for this goes to Burgess's poisonous little kindness. Merely as a matter of academic interest, some years ago David Lodge wrote an article on Graham Greene in the *New York Review of Books* where he glancingly exposed Burgess' canard. Of the over thirty-five novels and entertainments that Greene wrote, only three or four dealt with God and the Catholic faith. I remember *The Power and the Glory*, *Heart of the Matter*, *End of the Affair*. And those are exceptionally fine novels.

But to come back to Anthony Burgess, what would he make of the world today? Most of Europe, though let me stress not all of it, may have ditched God but the rest of the globe has gone completely bananas (insane) with god-bothering. And however reluctant it may have been, even Europe has had to perforce come to terms with it. One third of America is neo-conservative, if not tea-party super-conservative and another third is at least devoutly church-going. As to the Islamic countries, they are in the grip of a fundamentalist fever that threatens to plunge our world into an old-testament Armageddon. The phenomenon of the *jehadis* or the holy warriors of Islam affects almost everything we or our governments do and yet there is not much of an attempt or desire on our part to get under their skin and penetrate their psyches. This is again the result, to a large extent of the supercilious dismissive attitude exemplified by Burgess

and his ilk. Indeed, if he was alive, Burgess, would have to eat his words and start god-bothering in a very big and serious fashion.

What exactly do I mean by the title of my paper, the split personality disorder syndrome or SPDS in faith and ideology? At the outset let me clarify that I am not using SPDS in any technical sense. I hope to examine the great divide between what the believers of any hue set out to achieve and what they end up realizing. Or to put it differently, my talk is a meditation on the distance between what we profess to believe in and our actions. I hope to touch upon the contradictions within the holy books and how even if the text is the same, each one of us chooses to believe what suits us. Is human hypocrisy responsible for the gap? Is it double-speak? Is it wilful blindness? Or is it what life does to our ideals and best intentions?

Perhaps it's sheer serendipity that *God's Little Soldier*, a novel I wrote some years ago, deals precisely with the subject of this seminar: Faith and Ideology. The terms are often inter-changeable for as we have seen time and again, ideologies like capitalism and communism also turn into inflexible and rabid faiths. In the greater part of this paper, I will not be talking about the benign and munificent aspects of faith but about the havoc both organized religion and ideological beliefs can unleash. I will also offer my own version of how the mystics see the world.

I started writing *God's Little Soldier* in 1998, three years before 9/11. I had been intrigued for a long time by the notion of fanaticism of one sort or other; by those who take it upon themselves to defend their God (or ideology) and commit murder, mayhem, holocausts and genocides in His name or in the name of principles or in the pursuit of some sinister idea of a super-race.

The immediate trigger for *God's Little Soldier* was an event that occurred in the year 1988. Salman Rushdie had just published *The Satanic Verses*. (As I had discovered with my very first play, *Bedtime Story*, the precondition for exercising textual censorship is that those who are hyper-critical of the book, have most likely not read the work in question). Rajiv Gandhi's Congress government was the first to ban the novel.

After India had shown the way, Ayatollah Khomeini, the supreme head of the state of Iran, not a lay person but the very highest ranking religious authority in the country issued a *fatwa* to kill Rushdie, a citizen of the United Kingdom at that time. In short, to put the imprimatur of the Iranian government on a fiat to murder Rushdie for exercising what has been considered a fundamental right for over two hundred years in most democracies, the freedom of speech.

It was then that I asked myself the question ‘What kind of person would feel duty-bound to commit such a deed because of an arbitrary decree by a religious authority?’

I would like to very briefly sum up the story of GLS and then concentrate on a bizarre development fifteen months after my novel was published. And from there on move to larger questions and dilemmas. One of my very first decisions as I started working on *God’s Little Soldier* was to locate my protagonist, Zia, in an affluent liberal Muslim family instead of the two-dimensional template-notion of an Islamic extremist from a poor conservative background who has been brain-washed in a fundamentalslist madrasa where he has sat on the earthen floor rocking himself back and forth memorizing the Koran.

Zafar and Shagufta Khan have two sons, Amanat and Zia. The younger of the two, Zia is something of a mathematical prodigy. His Aunt Zubeida wants him to be a good Muslim and urges him to become an apostle of Islam without ever imagining that Zia will not only take that injunction seriously but twist and distort it as he does with everything, to its extreme. Zia is a purist. He views the world in absolute terms. There is no middle ground for him. He abhors that space which the Buddha called the Golden Mean.

When Ayatollah Khomeini proclaimed the fatwa against Salman Rushdie, Zia who was studying in Cambridge, U.K., felt duty-bound to pick up the gauntlet. Early in his search for the blasphemous author whom he referred to as Essar, Zia’s girl-friend and disciple, Vivian asked him, ‘But have you read *The Satanic Verses*?’

‘No, I have not. And I don’t intend to.’

‘How can you condemn a book without reading it?’

It is at this point that Zia crystallizes his rationale for pursuing Rushdie.

‘On whose authority do you or I take God? God is not $e=mc^2$, or the quantum theory, that you can check Him out for yourself if you are so inclined. Nor can different gods subsist side by side as Newtonian physics does with Einsteinium. God is faith and must be taken on faith. That is the essence of God.’ Zia spoke as if he was hewing the words out of stone. He was giving shape to ideas he had known in a vague and subconscious fashion but had never articulated before.

‘No Rushdie can affect Allah, nor can blasphemy or heresy touch the Almighty. Allah does not need protection from Satan but a true believer does. It is I who must defend the honour of God or else I, not God, will be defenceless against Satan. If I am to lead my people and perhaps even non-believers to Allah, then I must prove myself worthy of Him. I must vanquish Satan and protect myself and my flock.’

As it turns out Zia’s attempt to murder the author is foiled at the very last minute by his brother Amanat. From that moment Zia turns into a jihadi warrior. Zia is an idealist, one who is willing to put his life on the line for his convictions. As his name suggests, he could have been a beacon of light but things pan out rather differently. It is his older brother, Amanat who goes to the heart of the matter. ‘You are a good man,’ he tells Zia, ‘gone terribly, terribly wrong.’

After a stint as a jihadi warrior and terrorist, Zia is betrayed by his most trustworthy deputy, the Afghan, Yunus. The next avatar Zia assumes is of a Trappist monk called Lucens, high up in the mountains on the west coast of America. His conduct is exemplary and since he is good with numbers, he plays the market when the old monastery is destroyed by a storm. But soon the extremist in Lucens shows up and he leaves the monastery to take up the fight against abortions and the cause of orphans. As usual his intentions are noble. He starts Zero Orphans, an institution

which takes unwanted new-born children and once again he is able to finance his worthy activities with the money he earns on the stock exchange till one day he loses his Midas touch.

It is at this point that Zia turns to a Hindu guru, Shakta Muni, the eminence grise who has been a shadowy figure so far and is initiated into arcane Hindu practices without becoming a Hindu. Once again Zia has a new name: Tejas. Like Indira Gandhi's yoga guru, Dhirendra Bramhachari and Prime Minister Narsimha Rao's Chandraswami, Shakta Muni too is in the arms business. Thanks to the Tantrik, Zia-Lucens regains his gift and becomes a partner in the Muni's armament business.

One of the themes that the novel explores is that highly volatile quantity called idealism. In most instances, its exercise is fraught with danger. Most people forget, as Gandhiji never did, that the end does not justify the means. Zia is impatient and will use any means, however dubious, to achieve worthy goals.

Why add a new chapter a full fifteen months after the publication of GLS?

The question I had to ask myself was: Why would Zia, the holy warrior of my novel, *God's Little Soldier*, have a change of heart and convert to a different faith? I had hinted at Zia's peculiar dilemma in the English text and its German translation but it was only fifteen months after the publication of GLS that I wrote a new chapter to highlight the terrible quandary that confronts my protagonist.

This new chapter comes somewhere towards the very end (pages 561-580 of the Indian paperback edition of GLS) when the son of Zia's former deputy Yunus, the Afghan leader, Nawaaz Irfan offers Zia-Tejas a blank cheque on the condition that he supply him with nuclear weapons. As Zia opens more and more homes for 'Zero Orphans', his need for funding beomes acute. A blank cheque for over a billion dollars is no scoffing matter but for once the thought of this vast sum of radioactive money paralyzes him.

Here's a passage where the novice-master from the Trappist Abbey who's on his death-bed tries to find out why Zia felt the need to convert :

'This is your last chance to come clean, my sad, tortured friend. Why did Zia decide to become Lucens?' That's the question the novice-master poses to Lucens.

Father Paul never let go. Lucens sensed that he would hound him for an answer even after he was no more.

'One may occasionally come across Christians who have converted to Islam but I have hardly ever heard of a Muslim who has embraced Christianity. And certainly not a holy warrior like you. At least that's the received wisdom on the subject. So why did a fundamentalist like you break the mould? Was Allah not sufficient for you, Zia?'

The last three sentences were so soft and brittle, they disintegrated like mirages on hot desert sands. Lucens was not sure whether he had conjured up Father Paul's words or the priest had actually spoken.

'You shouldn't be talking so much. It's exhausting you. Would you care for a glass of water?'

'Last chance, both for you and me. Did you let Him down, Zia, or did you think it was the other way round?'

'Who?' Zia deliberately chose to be opaque in the hope that Father Paul would give the interrogation a break.

'You know well who I mean.'

Lucens realized there was no escaping a dying man. 'It was all such a long time ago, Father.'

'Yes. As long ago as this very minute since you can't ever forget what you did there. It was not Christ who beckoned you, was it, Zia? It was your unrelenting remorse and your need for forgiveness which made you come over to the Abbey.'

It maddened Lucens that this diminishing, receding monk was still trying to provoke him by calling him by his old name, Zia, even though every now and then it seemed as if he had passed out, or perhaps, even died.

‘And yet you were caught in a terrible trap. You could not forgive yourself for needing forgiveness. What greater shame could there be for an upright soldier of God who is doing what he imagines is God’s bidding and is yet crushed by the weight of the knowledge that his purported good deeds are nothing but heinous acts of the purest evil?’

Lucens was silent. The Abbot, Father Augustine, was the one who had taken him into the fold whole-heartedly. Lucens was grateful to him but he had never genuinely respected him. He was too indiscriminate in his goodness and compassion for mankind. Father Paul, on the other hand had always seen through Lucens.

‘Last chance, Zia. Unless you acknowledge the past and your role in it, you will not be at peace with yourself or with God.’

Maybe Father Paul was right. But there were things in Lucens’s past that he could not afford to think about even after he was dead.

‘The problem with stereotypes, Zia,’ Father Paul was not done with him yet, ‘is that they trap both the insider as well as the outsider. They are both its victims and yet are unable to break out of them.’ End of quotation.

As the dying monk astutely points out, Zia is unable to comprehend or explain his intense feelings of remorse. How can he possibly feel guilty when he is so passionately devoted to Allah and single-mindedly doing God’s work? After all, he’s torturing and murdering vast numbers of people to defend Allah from the unbelievers. But since Zia is convinced that he is betraying God by feeling guilty, he feels constrained to prove his fealty to the Almighty, and decides to escalate his attacks on the purported enemy and becomes even more violent.

The new chapter then is about Zia’s descent into hell and the absolution that must come from betrayal. It is perhaps the one and only time that the adult Zia slips up and shows his human side. There is a crack in his

unassailable and absolute certainties and we begin to suspect that even he is not beyond redemption.

9/11

Oddly enough 9/11 did not really affect or alter GLS in any fundamental way. Unfortunately Sri Lanka, Israel, India and numerous other countries had been victims of terrorism for decades. 9/11, however, was notable for many reasons: The impregnable fortress of America had been breached. A new and untried but highly effective and visually stunning method of creating havoc and terror had been discovered together with a monumental scale of the destruction and loss of life. And that too in the most powerful nation in the world.

Perhaps the most far-reaching consequence of 9/11 was that it eliminated all nuance from the discussion of extremism or terrorism. Discernment and the ability and willingness to discriminate between different causes and goals had gone out the window. And it gave a carte blanche to all the tyrannical regimes of the world to invoke the word 'terrorism' any time they wanted to repress dissent. Western governments starting with the U.S. used and still continue to exploit and escalate fear of terrorist attacks to justify curbing personal freedom, civil liberties and rights. But they did not stop there. Under the pretext of protecting its people, the most powerful in the world, clandestinely snoop on all its citizens through every conceivable mode of communication available starting from the internet. Everybody you wished to vilify became a terrorist. The Taliban, the Al-Qaeda, the Hamas Palestinians, the Chechens and the Tamil Tigers were clubbed together and painted with the same brush.

Zia's religion

One of the themes of GLS is supposed to be religion. But Zia's religion is neither Islam nor Christianity to which he converts and it certainly is not Hinduism to which he never converts. Nor is it some ideology like Marxism, the free market or rampant anarchism. Zia is consistent in one respect. His religion is extremism. Whatever the faith he embraces or the 'ism' he propounds, he will always take a stand at the rabid outer limit of a religious, political or ideological system.

(Perhaps all polarities are identical twins and Zia was following an honorable or dishonorable tradition depending on your point of view.

A rather horrifying aside at this point. There is sadly no dearth of ideological genocides and terrorism in recent history. Hitler, we used to think achieved almost the impossible: the murder of six million Jews, a quarter million gypsies, hundreds of thousands of Poles. And yet these numbers pale (shrink) when you think of Mao who managed to kill anywhere between 35 and 45 million of his own people during The Great Leap Forward. The political scientist, R.J. Rummel revived the term democide first used some forty years ago Theodore Abel. Rummel's definition of the word democide goes thus: 'the murder of any person or people by a government, including genocide, politicide and mass murder.' He extends his definition to include intentional or knowing reckless and depraved disregard for life as in the case of forced mass starvation.

The original estimates of the people who died during Stalin's Great Purge were in the range of 20 million. But these did not include the extensive deportation and deaths of people from the captive nations or the minorities inside the Soviet Union itself. Rummel's extensive research of the records from the Stalinist era put the figure then at 43 million. It turns out that democide was a far greater killer in the last century than all the war victims put together. The democide tally of 263 million deaths is six times higher than those killed in twentieth century wars.)

Guilt and Remorse

Does the *jehadi* warrior suffer from guilt and remorse? What an absurd idea. Aren't the two tantamount to blasphemy? How could guilt or remorse assail the holy warrior when he's doing Allah's bidding and fighting Allah's war? Sadly neither the non-Islamic nor Islamic mind is able to get away from this over-simplified and fixated way of thinking in the current climate of distrust. And that is Zia's dilemma. He dare not even admit to himself that he is choking on guilt and remorse and that he yearns for forgiveness and absolution. Instead, he believes that he is letting his God down and tries to compensate for his failings by escalating

the level of brutality. But as you perhaps know, BBC did a programme on Islamic holy warriors who had given up their chosen vocation without giving up on God and gone straight.

The disconnect: how do the Buddhists deal with violence and war?

We hear of terrorist attacks in Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan almost daily. By now we are not merely blasé but think of violence as a way of life. I have, however, a confession to make at this point. There was a disconnect in my mind. I had blanked out the question of how Buddhist Sri Lanka would reconcile one of the central tenets of its religion with that of maintaining their armed forces and the murder and massacres of the Tamil Tigers and civilian Tamils. Not for a moment do I wish to underplay the atrocities committed by Prabhakaran and his Tamil Tigers. But there's no escaping the fact that the Buddhists did not see the need for squaring the one with the other. They didn't see any contradiction between the two. I guess my eyes were opened when the Venerable Athuraliye Rathana, a hardline Sinhalese Buddhist monk joined hands with Mahinda Rajapaksa, the President of Sri Lanka in going after the Tamil Tigers and civilian Tamils.

'Day by day we are weakening them (them being the Tamil Tigers) militarily.' The Buddhist monk declared. 'Talk can come later.'

'Talk can come later.' The recent murder of Muslim Rohingyas in Burma and the ghastly destruction of entire villages seems to have followed the same principle. As you may recall, Buddhist monks led a crowd of their own people in Burma a couple of years ago, dragged out Muslim youths from their homes and slaughtered them.

(Despite being brought up on a regimen of cynicism by the rampant corruption and mendacity of our polity, I had hung on to the belief that while Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and the Jews in Israel could indulge in extraordinary belicosity and barbarism, the two religions which would never permit such atrocities were Buddhism and Jainism. After all the

central tenet of both the faiths is non-violence. More so in Jainism than even Buddhism.

The case of the Jains is indeed worthy of study though they have not indulged in overt violence as far as I know. But they have set a dubious precedent in contemporary India. They have done their best to keep the co-operative societies in which they live out of bounds to Muslims and also to non-vegetarian Hindu families who wish to become members though they take care not to articulate this policy in public. This despite the fact that the Indian constitution does not permit any discrimination in the composition of a co-operative housing society. The acute animus the Jains bear against the Muslims is disturbing to say the least. They seem to forget that intolerance is but another form of violence.)

Like all of us, Buddhists too suffer from the Split Personality Disorder Syndrome. And like us most of the time they are not even aware of the contradictions within themselves. I cannot emphasize enough that regardless of what our holy texts tell us, we human beings choose, twist and rationalize what we believe in.

The True Faith

(It might be worthwhile to look at the elements that go into constructing the 'us and them' binary.) Take any religion, Christianity, Islam, Judaism or communism, it can remain in its pristine form only for a few dozen years at the most. Religions and ideologies are like amoeba. They keep dividing and sub-dividing further and further. What would Jesus or the Prophet Mohammed make of the way their religions have developed and grown; and the schisms that have divided the body of Christ or of the Prophet? Who's right and who's wrong? Each schism claims to be the true heirs of the founding father or the relevant Holy Book. And of course the members of the new denomination form a club of the chosen ones. Even after Mohammed had declared that he was the last Prophet, someone or the other has claimed to be the Mahdi, the leader of a splinter group like the Aga Khan or the Syedna or even another prophet. It's no different with ideologies like communism. Stalin, Mao or the leaders of

the different Marxist parties in India all claim to be the only true inheritors, the rest are heretics and should either be excommunicated, burnt at the stake, banished, bumped off, or forgiven if, and only if, they convert to the true path.

By the fourth century A.D. there were so many different versions of Christianity, that the Emperor Constantine called a conference of bishops who formulated the Nicene creed of 325 AD which was further modified in 381 AD to decide on an official version of the faith. Obviously many of the conflicting gospels which were later called the gnostic gospels and various branches and interpretations of Christianity which were being practiced had to be suppressed. Who is to decide which were the authentic ones and which was the true faith or Christianity?

The subject of faith and ideology is rich in contradictions and complications but I will address only two of them and that too in passing. Firstly, the split personality syndrome occurs repeatedly in the text of the Holy Books themselves. The Koran, the Old and New testaments and the Gita often give contrary messages. If according to the Gita everything is preordained, then why do we have to pretend to make choices? What matter whether Arjun refuses to shed the blood of his cousins or acquiesces to Krishna's wishes? Almost every single time the Koran mentions the name of Allah, it is followed by the epithets 'all-compassionate and all-merciful'. Yet when you read the Koran, it speaks time and again about the awful hellfire that awaits the infidels and the lengths to which Allah will go to punish them. The believer will not be troubled by these seeming internal contradictions. As a matter of fact he will see them as rational and just while the impression left in the outsider's mind is of that of witnessing the Old Testament God in his 'vengeance is mine' mode.

Secondly, the split personality disorder is far more visible and much more severe in our individual take-aways from the teachings of the holy texts. Love, forgiveness, the poor and the children are at the top of the 'Jesus agenda'. But look at the strident believers in America and other parts of the world and you realize they seem to be totally unaware of the priorities set by Jesus. On the contrary many of the American Evangelists

promote the notion that wealth is a sign that Christ approves of your single-minded pursuit of money. Pope Francis is a long overdue change in the pomp and circumstance which have marked the papal office for so long but when will the cardinals and the bishops embrace the poor and the down-trodden instead of playing politics with them? As to Hindus, they would rather buy crowns studded with diamonds and jewels worth millions of rupees for their gods rather than spend the money for their less fortunate brethren. At the remarkably beautiful Ranakpur temple in Rajasthan, the Jain priests auction the first 'abhishek' ceremony at dawn to the highest bidder. In Genesis 1: 27 we learn that God created man and woman in his own image. May be he did but looking at our behaviour and our worship of mammon, it appears as if man has decided to make God in his image and tries to buy him with money.

The Other

The internal mechanism by which we justify our behaviour is to blame the other party for our prejudices, biases and actions. 'They are the problem, not us.' How do we manage this sleight of hand. The twin culprits who relieve us of all responsibility and make us believe in our purported innocence are 1) the 'other' and 2) the phenomenon known as stereotyping.

As you well know, the term 'the other' made good sense especially in earlier times before travelling became universal through the invention of trains, cars and aeroplanes. Any stranger even from the next village was an unknown quantity. The foremost question was always, 'Does the stranger-visitor come in peace or to do harm?' He was the alien, the unknown, and the outsider. Was one to greet and welcome him or shun him? Understandably suspicion, distrust and alarm bells were the preferred option.

But something that we often forget is that any schism instantly creates 'the other'. The irony is that in such cases brothers in faith turn mortal enemies overnight. Can you imagine how many 'others' were created in the early days of Christianity. The biggest break however must have

occurred when Martin Luther broke away from Rome and the Catholic Church to found Protestantism. It is no different with the Shias and Sunnis. We in India are lucky that they are not at each other's throats but in Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia and in Pakistan there's zero tolerance for each other.

The 'other' is the one whom we love to hate, loath and persecute, many a time because he's our mirror image.

Stereotyping

It's curious how we nurse stereotypes and how attached we are to them and yet resent them when we are their victims. We are furious and agitated, and quite rightly so, when there's an attack on a Gurudwara in the States and Sikhs are killed. Were we just as furious when the Sikhs were massacred after Mrs. Indira Gandhi's death or the massacre of Muslims in the Gujarat or Mumbai riots? How often have we experienced racial profiling because of our colour or alien names and religion? Our first impulse at such times is to tell the U.S. or U.K. immigration officer that we're not Muslims but Sikhs or Hindus. What exactly are we trying to suggest? That it's okay for these officers to racially profile the Muslims? Isn't that precisely what so many States in U.S.A. and Islamophobic countries and peoples are doing? How then are we different from them? And this is the only question that matters. Do we want to be sentient, extremely vigilant human beings about what we say, do and believe in or do we want to be like George Bush and say 'I don't do nuance.'

We prefer to paint all those we dislike, fear or detest with the same brush. But the only way we can fight prejudice, preconceived notions of the 'other' and stereotypes is through nuance and by trying to understand where the other is coming from, what are his fears and dreams? Remember Shylock? Have we learnt nothing from his passionate call telling us that he's no different from us? When are we going to take responsibility for our own actions or inaction? When are we going to start re-examining our fundamental beliefs, our uncritical hatred of the 'other', our prejudices or stereotypes? When will we probe and question

what our teachers, parents, gurus and babas and politicians tell us? Most of all when are we going to pause and turn the spotlight on ourselves and our facile beliefs and assumptions?

Kabir in heaven

We've seen a glimpse of the negative side of organized religion and ideology. But the mystics are the best example of all that is worthwhile in faith. I am going to shift gears now and read a passage where Zia's brother Amanat re-imagines the life of Kabir as an example of how the mystics deal with the human condition and God.

We were so much better off with you dead, the weaver Kabir's disciple, Inayat told him. Your reputation would have remained intact. And we would have grown fonder of you. Nostalgia is not just selective memory, it is the reinvention of the past as it never was. We would have romanticized and idolized you. Your crass attempts at attention-seeking and your juvenile desire to shock would have become the stuff of parables and mythology. You were dead. I checked again and again. You had no pulse and you had no breath. Why did you come back?

The weaver patted Inayat's back as if to console him. Inayat shook off the Master's friendly overtures.

It was something of a surprise for me too. I was standing in the queue with thousands of others waiting at the gates for St Peter to check in the Book of Life and tot up and tally my sins and good deeds and decide whether I was to go to heaven or hell. Suddenly, there was a commotion and the doors to God's mansions opened and Michael flew out. It was an amazing sight. The painters and the sculptors have got it wrong. You can't see the angels and yet there's no mistaking them. Their wings are transparent and insubstantial as air and the beatitude on the face ... I can see that you find all this rather florid and are getting impatient, Inayat.

Like everybody else I wondered why he was in such a hurry and why he was carrying a beautiful garland of carnations, or maybe they were roses, the colour of dried blood, when low and behold, he sat down

where I was waiting and put the garland around my neck and lifted me as if I was as light as breath, and took me straight inside.

People were screaming abuses. You would think that they would behave at least after they were dead but I could also understand their anger.

Welcome Kabir, I heard a wonderfully mellifluous voice speak to me. God got off his bejewelled gold throne and embraced me. We are absolutely delighted to see you here. We must say you kept us waiting so long, we had begun to wonder whether you had given up the idea of dying altogether. I prostrated myself in front of the glorious presence. I was overawed and speechless. I couldn't believe my eyes. I mean this was the real thing, the ultimate experience.

Rise, weaver. No need for you to touch our feet. He bent down and raised me. I do apologize that you had to stand in the queue with the rest of the crowd, God said. Peter had a bout of shingles and you know what a hypochondriac he is. He still hasn't managed to update the records for the births and deaths, and of course while he was recuperating, all was chaos. I'm afraid it's no excuse but that was the reason why you were not picked up directly from earth and had to stand in the queue.

I had the depressing feeling that I was still on earth. Nothing, it seemed, had changed. If you were in with the bosses you got special treatment.

Make yourself at home, weaver. This is after all your final resting place, your heavenly abode. Ask for whatever you want, milk and honey, the best fruit in the world, absolutely any kind of cuisine you fancy, wine, women, song. Anything you need, consider it yours. Any time you feel like company, just call or drop by. It would be a pleasure to spend time with you.

It was clear that the interview was over but I must have looked puzzled, maybe even a little alarmed, for God asked me, Is anything the matter, Kabir? You look pale and not entirely happy.

Almighty Father, am I to understand that I have got admittance to heaven?

But of course. Was there any doubt about that?

I don't mean to sound ungrateful but I thought this place had some standards.

He looked at me coldly and I could feel the mercury rising. You haven't been here over a minute, he thundered, and you already have complaints.

You misunderstand me, Lord, I said hastily. I merely wanted to point out that there must be some mistake.

What mistake? His irises had narrowed like a cat's.

How should I put it? My history of misdemeanours would hardly make me eligible for heaven.

Oh, he said, and his face relaxed and a smile broke out like sunlight from a crack on a grey, oppressive day. You mean your whoring and blasphemies, your days as a brigand and a highway robber, your constant lying and your desire to shock and scandalize, anything to be sensational?

I squirmed at this litany of my misdeeds and didn't dare look up.

There's more, much more. He paused. Do you want me to go on?

No, no. I am well aware that you are omniscient, my Lord.

How could we keep you out? You are our annual gesture of forgiveness. Our token sinner and untouchable. We do not subscribe to that dubious doctrine of equal opportunity but we have to be careful about our reputation. They call you a saint down there. We don't want to disappoint your constituency, do we?

Then he turned to me and said, Besides, don't forget, as our honorific title says, we are all-merciful and compassionate.

My joy knew no bounds then. This was truly the God of love. I fell on my knees and took his hand in mine and kissed it joyously. Thank you, God. You are truly great. Then all those waiting outside, the good and the bad, the sinners and the pious, the whole and the halt, they'll all find a place in heaven, yes?

He looked at me in consternation. You must be joking. What happens to the promise I made to the chosen people? What happens to heaven and hell? What happens to the concept of dharma? If people do not respect the word and the law, all nature will be out of joint. It will be a free-for-all. The stars and planets will stray from their orbits and crash into each other, spring will follow summer and the sun will freeze us all. He looked at me indulgently then. Enough nonsense, weaver. We know that old habits die hard and you are merely trying to get a rise out of us. He clapped his hands and a hundred hour is appeared out of the blue of the sky. Someone give a glass of ambrosia to the weaver. Look after him well. He is one of our favourites.

The cup was at my lips, the elixir of life that would grant me eternal youth and bliss. And a great sadness came upon me.

Tell me that we are all chosen, Almighty God. Tell me that you'll let all your creatures into the kingdom of heaven, the worms and the weevils, the birds of prey and the sharks in the sea, the lion and the serpent, the vines and creepers, the parasitical plants and the great trees, all those who walked the straight and the narrow and the rest who fell to temptation and ate of the apple. Tell me that no one but no one will be left out of paradise. I was breathless but continued recklessly. Forgive me, Father, but otherwise send me back to where I came from, for I cannot bear the thought of a God who will leave behind a single creature of his.

You are an arrogant fool, weaver. We would urge you to think again. Do not cross swords with the Almighty. We may deal in infinities but our patience is finite.

He looked long at me as if to give me time and a second chance.

Let them all in, Lord God, I said again.

I see that your mind is made up. So be it, weaver. You are banished forever to the earth and mankind.

Now you know, Inayat why I came back from the dead. There is only one God and Her name is life. She is the only one worthy of worship. All else is irrelevant.'