

Forces

Volume 2007

Article 47

5-1-2007

The Amnesic Bull

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Recommended Citation

Burney, Talmeez F. (2007) "The Amnesic Bull," *Forces*: Vol. 2007 , Article 47.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.collin.edu/forces/vol2007/iss1/47>

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TALMEEZ F. BURNEY

My question made her laugh as she handed me a glass of cold water from a nearby cooler. This girl was *shia* Muslim. According to our stereotypes, *shia* hate *sunni*. This concept has always existed; some *sunni* believe that whenever a *shia* gives water to a *sunni*, he has spit in it. I said, "Oh, come on, Saba, just tell me the truth. How many times did you spit in this glass?" Both of us burst into laughter.

She was quick in her response: "Don't you know, now that *Kazmi* is minister, he has ordered someone to spit in the reservoir from morning to night? Don't think *shia* will ever give up on *sunni*." Her answer was quick and joyous. Laughter cemented friendship for us.

Saba wasn't my classmate; even our departments weren't the same. She was in the last year of her Master's in International Relations. The girls' common room was our chatting spot. We had only one interest in common, literature. As an avid reader, she knew the basics of Urdu *Ghazal*. She even knew the history of the progressive movement, a powerful movement led by some talented but frustrated writers who addressed fissures in our old, basic concepts.

This chubby, short girl always wore black, a symbol of the *shia* sect. According to her, "I'm the same color from the inside out." Her expressive eyes always smiled under their clear glass curtain. Another girl in Saba's department was surprised by our long discussions; according to this girl, Saba rarely spoke with anyone else.

I don't know where she is now, but for the past three months I've been missing her, not because she was my best friend, but because she was *shia*. For many years we shared something, something with no material value but which changed and shaped our lives. Despite some extreme differences and constant conflicts between our sects, we never argued, even though we disagreed frequently.

Whenever I hear any news from Iraq about the fighting between *shia* and *sunni*, I start missing Saba. I know that death is neither *shia* nor *sunni*.

This fighting in Iraq always reminds me of a fable of two strong bulls who are buddies. A lion wants to eat them, but both of them are protectors of each other. The lion sends a fox because, when power fails, strategy works. As usual, the sly fox does his best to turn them into enemies. Those stupid bulls, they didn't even know the alphabetic difference between "fox" and "foe." The fox wasn't successful with the first bull, but he didn't give up. He limited his negotiations to the second bull. Finally, the bulls became enemies. This made the lion's job easier because when he attacked the first bull, the second didn't come to protect his former friend. The second bull forgot that he would be the next victim.

I don't know why the second bull always forgets the first. I think he has amnesia.

I don't know what Saba would say about his fable, although I'm sure she knows of it because of its commonality. The fox is sly but not smart enough to succeed every time in separating the flesh from bone. I'm sure Saba would agree with me, even though sometimes she disagreed just to tease me; I can still see her hidden laugh behind her twinkling eyes.

The Golden God

TALMEEZ F. BURNEY

The reflection
of one nation's adoration
through its own complexion.