

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## The Void Ali Mohammad Lone Translated and introduced by Ishrat Bashir

Novelist, playwright and short story writer, Ali Mohammad Lone, was born in 1927 in Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir, India. He worked as Assistant Producer in Radio Kashmir, and as Deputy Secretary of Cultural Academy of Jammu and Kashmir. He began his literary career by writing in Urdu but soon turned to his mother tongue Kashmiri. Lone has authored many novels, plays and short stories. *Asi Ti Chi Insaan* (We Too Are Humans) is his famous novel in Kashmiri. His play *Suyya*, which has been translated in a number of Indian languages, bagged the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 1972. Lone has also translated Maxim Gorky's famous novel *Mother* into Kashmiri. He has been honoured with Soviet Land Nehru Award. Though influenced by left-oriented Progressive Writers' Movement in India, Lone skilfully uses modernist elements in his work. He died in an accident on 22 December 1987 while returning home in Indira Nagar, Srinagar.

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Vacuum! Infinite, boundless, ever growing vacuum!

The vacuum is not there out in the Space but has sprung from within my heart and mind, a void that never fills up.

This cycle of day and night

A meaningless thing

Day breaks, light appears

Evening comes, night falls

The day has passed. Night, too, is over. But what do I care? How does it matter when I do not know how to think, how to reflect on things? I am not a recluse or an introvert but my friends think that I am because I don't know how to talk like them.

Introvert!

This label makes me laugh. Not exactly laugh but you can say it brings a kind of smile on my lips. Yet I keep quiet. What can I say to them when I don't know how to talk like them? I cannot help my silence.

Among my relations, it has become an accepted fact that I am a reticent fellow.

'It is wisdom,' pronounce the elders.

'It is arrogance,' tease the youngsters.

'When one acquires wisdom, words become superfluous,' say my semi-literate friends.

And I answer all of them with a smile on my lips. Not because I want to mock them for saying this but because I don't know the reason for my silence. So far as this vacuum is concerned, what can one do about it? It expands itself day after day. Sometimes the whole universe appears only an atom in this endless vacuum. Perhaps even smaller than that. Who knows? What does one call this condition of being?

It is raining today. The whole atmosphere has cooled down. People have taken off their T-shirts and put on suits. But my vacuum! Nothing affects it. Cold or heat, within or without, does not shake it at all.

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When heart and mind are without any emotions, all the varied and colourful expressions of nature are meaningless. How could they affect this vacuum? It remains the same. Insensitive! Dead! Static!

Tell me what is the purpose of our existence? Perhaps you have found some meaning of your own existence. But what is the meaning of my existence? Why do I exist? And if I don't, why not?

Thousands of books!

And even reading hundreds of philosophies didn't help me find the answer, not even all the religions of the world and all the perspectives on it gave me any clue.

My question still awaits an answer.

I couldn't reach any conclusion.

That is why I consider my being, my existence, pointless, absurd and moribund. Even an automaton or a robot has a purpose to be. It is created with and for a purpose which it fulfils. But what am I, a robot or a human being? I could never know it!

People are burdened with and bound in various shackles, shackles of matrimony, of family, of business, of society; and imprisoned in these chains, they trudge up the hill of life like a moorhen with eyes and ears shut and finally reach some kind of end or destiny. But what of me? I too am locked up in all these shackles. Who is free of these chains! Why, then, do I still feel free of them, alone and alienated.

I too leave for office in the morning and come back in the evening, eat my meals, listen to the radio, read the newspaper, keep account of groceries, insurance, G.P. Fund, income tax, house rent, deaths, births, joys, sorrows – even after attending to all these worldly concerns, I feel entirely free. I feel free, alone and untrammelled and it unsettles me from within. Even though I do not believe in God, yet at times, I burst out honestly:

'Oh my God!'

Recently I met with an accident. I fell off a bicycle one night. At that time also, I cried out, 'Oh my God!'

But as soon as people pulled me up, I felt nothing, no emotions, no feelings, neither of fear nor of any adventure. At the hospital, when the doctor straightened out my injured arm, I gave a shriek, but only because of the physical pain and broke out in a sweat from head to toe. The doctor perceived something, his hands trembled and he said apprehensively that it might be a fracture. The worried expression on the doctor's face made me laugh and he was surprised. When I was laid on the X-ray table, my arm was straightened once more, and I shrieked again. The doctor said hesitatingly,

'I am afraid that it is a fracture.'

'Only two?'<sup>1</sup>

I burst out laughing. The doctor was now angry and said:

'Sir! Do you think it is a joke? Your bones will take at least three months to heal.'

'Only three months? Ha ha ha ...!'

On hearing this, I don't know why I became sad. The doctor examined my head and said, 'You may have got head injury as well?'

Now I was quiet. How would have I said to this fool of a doctor that head is injured only when it carries some grey matter in it? Empty heads do not get hurt!

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<sup>1</sup> Here the writer puns on the Kashmiri word *zī*. With a very slight change in pronunciation, this word can be used to mean 'that' as in 'I am afraid that it is a fracture' as well as 'two' as in 'only two'.

After seeing the X-ray, I became even sadder. My arm bones were good. The doctor was happy and he said in English, 'You are very lucky. Thank your stars.'

Phew!

This was the only chance I would have in my life to get a break from the routine but I had missed it. My bad luck! Sleeping on the neat and clean, white and cosy bed of the hospital is sheer romance. But it wasn't what fate had in store for me. And this foolish doctor says, 'Really, you are very lucky. I congratulate you.'

'Huh! Idiot!'

People suffer some kind of want in their life, want of some material things and in the process of acquiring them, a fine and beautiful life slips through their fingers. But I don't suffer any material deprivation or any want of such kind. What I suffer from is a lack within. My heart is devoid of every emotion, be it fear, joy, sorrow, romance, love or hatred.

Wise men say that we do not live by food, water and air only. These things sustain only the body. However, the human body contains something else as well that needs a different kind of nourishment. I too believed in this truth some time before. That is why I read books, wrote stories, acted in plays, listened to music, watched movies, joined clubs, attended parties, socialised with people, laughed and had fun, mourned and cried with them. That was my past. But my present is altogether a different story. I feel all these exercises futile and worthless. Reading books emptied my mind. Writing stories twisted and complicated the story of my own life. Drama is senseless imitation; music, sheer wilderness. Watching movies is purposeless; going to clubs, hypocrisy; socialising with people and hanging out with friends, a trouble. In fact, living with my family also seems a trouble to me.

Why is it so?

What do I want? I want nothing, absolutely nothing. Yet this vacuum of heart and mind sometimes feels like it is devouring me and I wish this void filled up. What would one need to fill it up with? Love? Compassion? Sympathy? But, if this vacuum, this void does not disappear even after having all these things, then what will one do?

Phew!

I don't get bored even!

Had I been bored, that too would have counted as some kind of emotion and filled this emptiness in some way!

Oh my God!

Empty heart! Empty mind! How can it be cured?

Rain might be falling. The atmosphere might have cooled down. The pleasant cool of winter must have begun. In such cool weather, sleeping under a cosy white quilt is a luxury but only for those who might be waiting for the dawn after the dark night. But what will one, who has no hope for the dawn to break, do? Where will he go!

Ah!

This vacuum within me! I wish this void would fill up!