

# AAGHORI

BY SURENDERA PRAKASH

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SURENDRA PRAKASH

# AAGHORI

TRANSLATED BY C REVATHI

The dream images of “Aaghori” are mystic and  
epic like. Superb. Abstract.

– **Gulzar**

The writer and the translators won the Katha awards for Creative Fiction  
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**M**y father had a weakness for amruti, besan laddu and chitriwala kela. Once we – my father, Bawaji and I – were walking past Chelaram Halwai's shop when his feet suddenly stopped. The sweets were tastefully decorated and arranged in huge trays. Chelaram, dressed in clean, neat clothes, was being his usual attentive self, deftly weighing the sweets for his customers. On his left, his assistant was frying the amruti in a shallow frying pan.

My father's nostrils began to twitch. Without uttering a single word, he went and stood in front of Chelaram.

"Come bauji," Chelaram said, a faint smile on his lips, "What can I serve you?"

"Give me one quarter seer of steaming hot amruti," my father said, and looking at us he added, "And yes, one quarter seer of besan laddu. Now, what will you have, Bawaji?"

But Bawaji was not paying attention. "And you Bawaji?" My father asked again. "Nazar Suwalli," murmured Bawaji. "No, nothing, I don't care much for these things." He was pushing an exploratory finger into his right nostril.

"But still ... something?" You could see from his face that my father's mouth had begun to water.

"All right then, get me a quarter seer of raw bhindi, Nazar Suwalli," Bawaji answered with utmost indifference.

Chelaram placed the packet of amruti and besan laddu in my father's hands. We paid him and started walking towards the vegetable shop. There were all kinds of vegetables there, freshly sprinkled with water and glistening. At my father's request, the vendor chose small, tender bhindi, weighed them and gave them to Bawaji. He tied them up in one corner of the chadar that was wrapped around his shoulders. We started on the laddu and amruti while Bawaji ate the raw bhindi as we walked towards the graveyard.

The graveyard had many small and big graves. Grass had grown wildly on some, some had raised platforms, while a few others had headstones. We stopped near one which was bigger than most and had a plastered platform. On the headstone was engraved,

BABA FAKIR SHAH, SON OF ...

DATE OF BIRTH ...

DATE OF DEATH: 15 AUGUST, 1947.

The three of us fell silent for a moment, our eyes fixed on the grave. Taking a deep breath, Bawaji spoke, his voice so strange that the hair on my body bristled.

“Arré Kirpa Ram, ask for whatever you want. You are in Baba Khizr Shah’s durbar.”

My father had always wanted enough money that would buy him certain conveniences – a two or three storeyed house with six rooms, which, no doubt, would have a municipal water connection but there would also be a hand pump, in case of an emergency. In one corner of the large courtyard in front, there would be two or three plantain trees with huge bunches of long chitriwala plantains which, on plucking, would become speckled and have just the right sweetness. There would be a guest house just off the courtyard – always filled with guests – and a huge veranda with comfortable cane chairs. During summer, the courtyard would be sprinkled with water and charpais would be brought out. Sitting on these charpais, everyone would feast on piping hot amrutis, washing them down with cold lassi. The safe would be stacked with money and the keys to it would hang at my mother’s waist.

My father looked at Bawaji, amazement flooding his face. “Baba Khizr Shah is dead?” he asked. “But I thought he was immortal. How can such a man die?”

“Nazar Suwalli,” said Bawaji, kindly. “This is not that Khizr, child. This Khizr was my fellow disciple. We were followers of the same saint. He is dead. And I am about to die. He was older than me and attained eminence in his life. He now stands in the presence

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**Aaghoris:** A group of sants who reject society and any identity bestowed on them by society. **Amrutis:** Also known as imarti and as jangri. **Chitriwala kela:** Special plantains that are speckled when ripe and very sweet. **Nazar suwalli:** May the benevolent eye be on you!

of the Holy Cherisher. I have seen him in my dreams several times, sweeping the durbar. Go ahead, don't hesitate, your wishes are sure to be fulfilled."

My father removed his footwear and fell to his knees. He spread out both his hands and started muttering something. Presumably, he was praying for his dreams to come true.

On our way back, a thought suddenly struck me. The year was 1945. The month, April. I was still a fifteen year old. Why did the tombstone on Baba Khizr Shah's grave show 1947 as the date of his death? .

When I asked my father, the look on his face changed as if an unexpected tragedy had befallen him. He remained dumbstruck for a minute and then he asked, "Now Bawaji, what is all this?"

Bawaji looked evasive. "Nazar Suwalli," he murmured again. "What does this slave know about the ways of the Invisible?"

Where was the time for my father's wishes to be fulfilled? In just two years the Partition took place and we moved over to this side. My father died a few years later.

When we returned after performing his last rites, I saw my brother open his diary. He put his right hand over his eyes. Tears flowed down his cheeks and into his beard, as he picked up his pen.

"What are you writing, Bhapaji?" The words tumbled out of my mouth before I could stop them.

"Bauji's date of death." The words choked in his throat.

"Then write, Kirpa Ram, son of Attar Singh. Date of death: 15 August, 1947."

My brother just stared at me with tear filled eyes.

**B**ut then these are matters about days that are no more. What's the use of remembering them, I asked myself. Except that ... Bawaji was still on my mind.

Bawaji (whose name was Dayal Das), belonged to the town of Jhang where the grave of Waris Shah, the well-known poet of Punjab, is situated. The grave has neither fence nor roof. Yet, it

is said that, during the monsoons, not a drop of rain falls on it. Some say that the grave is Mai Heer's. Maybe Waris Shah, Heer and Ranjha, all lie buried in the same grave, though there's no headstone declaring that – but such things are of no consequence, really.

Bawaji. The man with a shaven head, a broad forehead, large eyes, a round, lustrous face and a short, stocky body. Whenever we asked him, “Bawaji, who are you? Where do you come from? What is your caste?” He would reply with a smile, “Me? Oh, I'm a mad, mixed-up man, neither a Hindu nor a Mussalman. I am a native of Jhang.”

The astonishing thing about him was that, when he was in deep thought, his face had a striking resemblance to a hooded snake. He had lost both his parents when he was a child. He had joined a group of Aaghori sadhus and had later become a disciple of a Sufi saint. Thus was his life spent ... but was this how his life was spent?

I asked him once, “Bawaji, who are the Aaghori?”

“Nazar Suwalli,” he said, after a long, meditative moment. “You are a child, just a child, and you wish to plumb the depths of the sea by jumping into it?”

All I could gather was that these people wish to live with only one identity, that of an Aaghori, casting aside every other identity bestowed upon them by society. But it is a lifelong struggle.

**I** am seated in my room when someone suddenly emerges from within me and sits down on the sofa by my side.

“Who are you?” I ask.

He says he does not yet have an answer to that question. He's still trying to understand himself. And at that moment, he's in the process of effacing the identity bestowed on him by society.

I don't know him, don't recognize his voice. There's a strangeness about him that fills me with dread. My heart is thumping as I get up and quickly walk out, leaving him behind.

The lane from my house leads to the main road with its continuous stream of scooters and cars and trucks. These things are mightier than man, they are made of metal that is much



stronger, and the speed at which they run can smash a human to smithereens if he gets in their way. The one lesson I have learnt in my life is, Follow all the rules of the road conscientiously, otherwise

...

I turn right. There is the huge forensic laboratory that belongs to the government – a place where tools used in crimes and the fingerprints of criminals are identified. It has a compound wall behind which everything lies hidden. Huge gates open out onto a bridge that spans a dirty drain. One or two people are always sitting on the broad parapets on either side of the bridge. When I walk past, I see a man whose face resembles a hooded serpent. His large eyes seem to bore into me. The man I thought I had left behind in my room is here. He becomes one with the crowd and loses his strange identity.

I feel a tingling in my feet. My heart beats louder, my mind seems possessed as I walk on. The road I'm travelling on dissolves into another, which merges into a third and that in turn into another ... endlessly.

What is your destination? I ask myself.

But then, no one has a true destination. At some point in time, we all start on our life's journey but later lose ourselves in something or other. The identity bestowed on us by society disappears, I now understand the meaning of Baba Dayal Das's words of long ago: Every human being's struggle throughout his life is to establish an identity for himself which will continue to live even after his death.

The road which I have taken is coming to an end. I have reached the main road. Darkness has set in. Street lamps glow on either side.

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**Waris Shah (1730 – 1790):** One of the greatest poets of Punjab. No Punjabi poet has translated its deepest desires and dreams into verse as well as he has. The story of the legendary lovers, Heer and Ranjha, had already acquired fame by the time Waris Shah wrote his famous poem in 1766. He became so possessed by the characters, especially Heer, that he wrote very little else.

**I**n spite of the darkness, our flight continued. Was the first flight the one made from Canaan to Egypt? Or was it the one from Mathura to Dwaraka? Or the one from Mecca to Medina?

No, people have been fleeing for countless years, but those who fled during those early days had no special identity of their own. Their stomachs were empty and their throats parched. They all lie buried in graves around Baba Khizr Shah's tomb. And once a year when the moon is full, they rise from their graves, to narrate the story of their flight to each other. They relate the hardships they faced before they acquired an identity and the oppression that was their lot afterwards.

**N**ow I understand it all. When Baba Dayal Das and my father returned after praying at Baba Khizr's grave, one half of me had stayed behind while the other had walked with them. While the former self witnessed the narration of the corpses, and later became one with the dead in their graves, the latter self witnessed the untimely death of my father's wishes.

It was a time when gods and goddesses were not born and we were a group with no identity. What was our strength then? I have no idea. I only know that thunder, rain and storm filled us with terror, our hair was matted, our beards unkempt. There were some amongst us who did not have hair on their faces, whose bodies were soft and exuded a strange warmth and they carried our children in their arms ...

**W**hen I return home after the long journey, I see that he's still there in my room. He raises his head and asks, "Is it raining outside?"

I am puzzled. "What makes you think so?" I ask. "You are thoroughly drenched."

Arré, what is this? I am drenched to the skin. When did it rain? And where?

I feel very foolish. I have been unaware of a significant reality in

my life. There I have been, out in the rain, I have got wet and yet, I am totally unaware of it.

To hide my embarrassment, I say the first thing that comes to mind. "Did you have tea?"

"No, I was waiting for you."

He speaks as if we are well acquainted. But why, why is he acting so familiar? Who is he? Why is he here? In what way is he related to me? These and other questions jostle for attention within me. Time itself seems to come to a standstill while I'm waiting for answers.

But nothing, nothing comes to my rescue. My wife comes in with tea.

What is this? When did I ask for tea?

"Will you have something to eat?" my wife asks.

"Yes, yes please – something light," he says, then turning to me, he asks, with the familiarity he had adopted earlier, "What would you prefer? Sweet or salted?"

I'm taken aback. Who's the master of the house, he or I? "Who the hell are you?" I demand.

"Arré, don't you recognize me? I am the master of the house," he says, chuckling.

"Then who am I?" I shout, pounding my chest with both my fists, each word dripping poison.

"You are the self I left behind when Baba Dayal Das took us to visit Baba Khizr Shah's grave," he explains patiently.

I am stupefied. I suddenly remember words once heard from Baba Dayal Das. Such experiences are inevitable when one is in the process of moving from a state of identity to one of non-identity.

I have to accept the fact that I am that self which had stayed behind in the graveyard. And now after a long journey, had reached here in search of its other half.

We have tea and snacks together and then he says, "Tell me, what brings you here?"

"I have come all the way to narrate the story of my flight."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean this: Once upon a time I had an identity which was

bestowed on me by Him. Then there came a day when He could not tolerate that identity of mine. He ordered all of us, that is, all those who had that identity, to flee – and I ...“

“Mmm ...” He slips into deep thought and for sometime keeps staring at the empty teacups. Then all of a sudden, he says, “Listen!”

I look at him, all attention.

“Was the tomb really Baba Khizr Shah’s?”

“That’s what we were told by Bawaji.”

“Was there not someone called Hazrat Khizr who showed the way to misguided travellers?”

“Yes, I remember! Bauji had also asked the same question that night when we were at Baba Khizr’s tomb, How can death have any effect on him?”

“Where was he, then? When you were forced to flee, did you not ask Hazrat Khizr, Where should we go?”

“Such a thought never occurred to us. All of us gathered on a full moon night around Baba Khizr Shah’s grave and prayed and lamented for a long time.”

“Did Baba Khizr listen? Were your prayers accepted?”

“How can one know the ways of the Invisible?”

“No. But how long can such things remain concealed? When God’s creatures are in peril, when people of one identity compel those of another to flee, then it becomes the duty of Khizr – whether he is Hazrat Khizr or Baba Khizr – to tear the veil of duality and show the right path to misguided travellers. Allah has made this task obligatory on him.”

“Perhaps you are right. We belong to the race which has been guided by Khizr.”

“Then come, let us pray and plead for guidance.”

We embrace each other and weep bitterly for long, till the moon disappears from the sky and the Universe envelopes itself in darkness.

And in the stillness of the night, all of us who were bound together by a common identity, lay fast asleep. We had left our houses and gathered in an open place, waiting for Hazrat Khizr ...”

Who had started the narration? He or I? I experience a moment which is drowned in silence. I look around me with a great sense of uncertainty, the room has a cot, a centre table, and shelves filled with books. Standing next to the books is a statue of a half-naked black woman, holding a small black child in her arms.

I've seen the statue several times before. The black woman has always looked sorrowful, while the child's face is devoid of any expression. But, but what is this! Today, her face wears that curious expression which appears just before laughter bursts out. Already the whole place echoes with her laughter.

Once I had imagined that she was the Holy Virgin and that the little child was Christ. Why can't this be so? Can't the Messiah be black? But then, with blacks all over the world awaiting their sacrifice on the altar of identity, wasn't it a time for great sorrow rather than for mirth?

The sound of her laughter fills me with dread and a scream dies within me. For God's sake, revert to your sorrowful state, the look of a mother is what befits you ...

Suddenly he, who is my other half, speaks softly.

“Where have your thoughts strayed? Why have you stopped the story of your flight?”

“Yes, yes,” I say, shaken out of my reverie. “It's a story. But remember there is a story within a story and that in turn leads to another story. Grasping the identity of the story, finding the essence of that which is a figment of the imagination, is your business. This story is such that it cannot be put into words.”

The words I speak come out as if from a void. I start narrating the events of the night once again.

“When the sky was moonless and the world was in complete darkness, those of us who had been bestowed the same identity, awaited Hazrat Khizr. We spotted in the distance, the dim flare of

a torch moving towards us. Those of us who were not asleep, woke the rest. We looked towards the approaching light. There was not just one torch out there, but many,”

Someone asked, “Do these lights which brighten the Universe herald the arrival of Hazrat Khizr?”

“Maybe,” someone else said, “Though our forefathers have been guided by this light, it is the first time this has happened in our lives.”

And then the sound of slogans rent the air – there seemed to be many voices.

Was Hazrat Khizr accompanied by his army?

“Yes,” said a voice. “They are for our protection. Now rest assured that our long wait has ended and we shall soon begin our journey towards our destination.”

The last words of the speaker were drowned in the deafening sound of slogans. Then we heard screaming and shouting from one side.

Perhaps, perhaps it’s Hazrat Khizr? Ha, Ha, Ha! Sounds of hysterical laughing, The voices reached a crescendo.

I was startled. The smile on the face of the Black Virgin vanished abruptly. I looked around. There were many people there, confronting us with guns in their hands. They wore huge turbans, one end of the cloth covering their faces. We could not make out whether they were laughing or crying. Then all of a sudden their guns started spitting fire, and one by one our people fell to the ground.

But we were saved! My black mother had shielded me.

“We are safe, aren’t we Mother?” I asked.

“Yes, my son,” she said, softly. “Because we are idols of clay.”

At this moment, a man appeared in front of us with a gun in his hand. He asked, “Who are you people?”

Looking towards me, my mother replied.

“We,” she said in her soft voice, “Do not have an identity.”

“All right then, we will grant you one,” he said and rituals were performed which bestowed us with an identity.

We were thrilled. They started dancing with joy. Then, suddenly they stopped and turned to us.

“We know who you are!” one of them said, “You belong to the same group of people whose corpses lie scattered all around!”

“Maybe,” my black mother murmured.

But this mild answer only provoked a volley of shots. We stood there, amazed.

“Why don’t you fall down and die?” they asked in unison.

“We don’t know. Perhaps because our identity is self-made,” my mother replied.

They stared at each other in silence and spoke to each other in gestures. The fire they had lit had spread and was about to reach the place where we stood. They seemed to be in some sort of a hurry.

One of them removed a sword from the cloth tied around his waist and moved towards my mother.

Everyone watched him with bated breath.

Grabbing the left breast of my mother, the man swung his sword. The next moment, my mother’s breast was in his hand.

Now, he attacked the other breast.

My mother’s chest was soaked with blood.

She stood there in silence, watching, while I struggled to find the meaning behind this madness. The black child’s eyes continued to be expressionless.

We stared at each other, astonishment growing on our faces. The man stood up. He snatched the child from its mother and started walking away.

“Stop” I shouted. “What is your intention? Why are you separating a child from its mother?”

“I do not know the reason behind the commands of the Invisible. I am merely following an order to separate the child from the black mother after her breasts are severed.”

“But where are you taking the child?” I asked.

“To Baba Khizr Shah’s tomb. He accepts everyone’s prayers,” he said. “I want this child to give up that identity which can be killed.”

Tongue-tied, I watched him as he disappeared from sight.

I turned round and saw the black woman. She still stood on the book shelf, bleeding profusely. She no longer held the black child with the expressionless face. But the face of the black woman now reflected a myriad emotions.





## BIONOTES

Surendra Kumar Oberoi, who writes under the pen name **Surendra Prakash**, is a Sahitya Akademi Award winner. Born in Lyallpur, Pakistan, he migrated to Delhi after the partition and made his living as hawker, rickshaw-puller, flower seller and travelling salesman. His works include *Doosre Aadmi Ka Drawing Room*, *Baraf Par Makalma* and the award-winning anthology, *Baz Goyi*. He now lives in Mumbai and writes scripts for films and television plays.



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**S**et in the backdrop of the Aghori sants, a young man awakens to the shocking truths about his past and present. He soon understands that not all that he sees around him is real. *Aghori* paints the narrative in abstract colours; a poetic, lyrical story.

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