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An illustration of two dark brown hands against a textured teal background. The hands are positioned with palms facing each other, holding a cluster of white rice grains. Some grains are falling from the hands. The word 'RICE' is printed in large, white, serif capital letters across the bottom of the image, with rice grains integrated into the lettering.

# RICE

X AHMAD ABBAS

# R I C E

*and*  
OTHER STORIES

by  
① / K. AHMAD ABBAS /

*With an Introductory Letter*  
*by*  
Mulk Raj Anand

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KUTUB  
BOMBAY

1947

*Published April 1947 by Phiroze  
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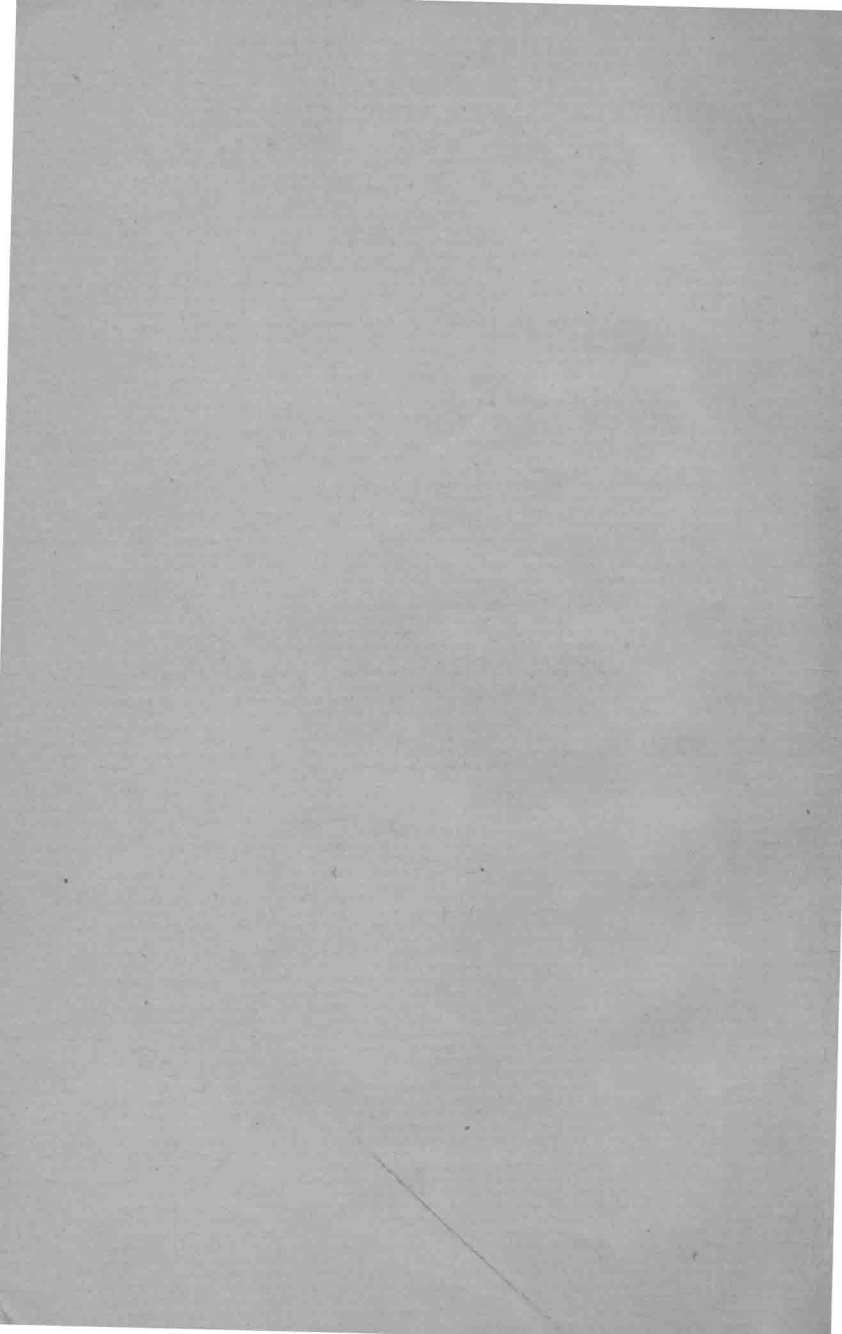
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By the same Author

OUTSIDE INDIA  
AND ONE DID NOT COME BACK  
LET INDIA FIGHT FOR FREEDOM  
TOMORROW IS OURS  
DEFEAT FOR DEATH  
REPORT TO GANDHIJI  
(In collaboration with N. G. Jog)

In Urdu

MOOSAFAER KI DIARY  
MAULANA MAHOMED ALI  
EK LARKI  
ZUBEIDA



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My dear Abbas,

I have owed you a letter for almost ten years, ever since you sent me your story 'Sparrows' to read. So that when you went off on one of your eternal peregrinations round the country and left me the bunch of stories, which you had selected and translated from your Hindustani narratives of the last few years, to see through the press with a preface, I thought I would take this opportunity to make amends for my prolonged negligence and address you that letter which I have owed you.

Somehow, there seems to me a certain appropriateness for this kind of acknowledgement of your stories, because isn't every story one writes a kind of letter sent to the reader, a kind of cordial greeting, demanding an answer? Of course, the acknowledgement, or the answer, seldom arrives, but I suspect every writer secretly longs for a fan mail. And if you have not ruthlessly suppressed this longing in you, then perhaps you won't be too embarrassed to see this fan letter appended to your book instead of the preface you asked for.

Let me begin by thanking you, even though belatedly, for the gift of 'Sparrows', which you

sent me before the war. I know it will be poor consolation for my default, in not acknowledging receipt of it for you to know that I ran excitedly down the stairs from my attic after I had perused it and insisted on reading it to an English writer, who was my friend and neighbour at that time. He liked the story, but, probably because he had been disturbed in his morning's routine (and there was always hell to pay if his morning's routine was ever disturbed!) he said he did not know what there was in the story to get so excited about. I told him that it was one of the few stories written in India which portended a quite new development in the art of the short story in our modern languages. I tried to indicate to him the lyrical quality which you had so delicately infused into it. I drew his attention to your creation of a unique character in Rahim Khan, one of the first few men in our modern short story who is shown attempting to be an individual from within the gamut of the old feudal society and failing in his attempt. My English friend stammered assent, but I doubt very much if he saw what I meant because the struggles of men to be individuals matured a long time ago in Western Europe, and, by now, the average European intellectual has begun to take it for granted or to wish the problem away,

either by being irresponsibly individualist or by seeking absorption in the Absolute through the philosophy of the Vedanta.

On the other hand, this question of the emergence of man from the restraints, inhibitions, codes, conventions and violences of the old society to the status of an individual integrated in a new community of like individuals, so that the development and the expression of human personality should become possible, is a very important one for us in India. For we are only just coming through from the long eras of feudal and imperialist suppression, and the fatalism which was consequent upon these, to the recognition of human rights. And consciously or unconsciously, a great deal of the fiction in our languages is concerned with this theme. Only, some writers pervert the characters with which they deal by showing mechanical changes in them in the interest of a false progressivism. Whereas, your achievement in 'Sparrows' lies in the fact that you showed Rahim Khan, the brutalised, boorish peasant, wife beater and sadist, destroyed by the old society, going steadily to his doom without recanting and only relieved ironically by the fugitive tenderness he has for those sparrows. That is the way in which any integral change in human character occurs, by

the release of some instinct, emotion or feeling, hitherto unsuspected by a person, suddenly coming to the surface from the deeply buried substrata of race memory through some obscure incident or crisis. And it is in the recognition of the irrational elements in the human make up in which lies the true poetry of change or becoming.

It is your alliance with such moods which gives to your stories the predominantly lyrical tone which I so much admire in your short fiction. Apart from 'Sparrows', it is reflected in your latest story, 'Saffron Blossoms', surely the most hauntingly poignant piece of lyricism that has come out of the Kashmir struggle. This poetic note is also struck to great effect in the constant iteration of 'Sylvia' in the story which bears her name. And it is present in the irony which is behind 'Flowers for Her Feet,' and in the conception of 'Twelve Hours' though you shied before the tenderness implicit in the young girl's bursting youth and in the ex-prisoner's frustration in that piece and did not build up the tension necessary to communicate their yearning for each other at high enough pressure. The lyricism is never quite absent from your pieces and it is this quality in your fiction which distinguishes your short stories from much of the pedestrian naturalism that still survives in the Urdu short

story.

I think it cannot be too much insisted upon that the art of the short story, emerging from the conventional abstract narratives of the moral tale, in the 'Yoga-Vasistha' and in 'The Arabian Nights', is now entering upon a phase where the individual human being becomes the hero. And it is in the mysterious realms where intimations from our darkest past quarrel with our new desires, fresh excitements and modern crises that the new myths will be born and adequate symbols evolved which may transform man through the imaginative arts. The short story, like the poem, is a personal art: it takes its raw material from the accepted truths and facts of life: but it is concerned to create beauty out of the collision of these facts with the intimate tendernesses of the human sensibility upon which hinges the approach of the inner eye to the outside world. So that we have to make intuitive guesses about unconscious motives, always so near and yet so far from us, we have to have premonitions about the causes of pain which always lies quiescent about us, we have to have a glimpse into the secret places of the heart, where our wonderful desires and longings are always waiting, half smothered by heavy winds and half open like budding flowers, in the stormy period of revolutionary

change through which we are passing. And if in the attempt to unlock the gates of the inner world, in order to flood it with light, we are led into fantasy, let us not shirk the consequences of imaginative creation.

The strength of your short stories, my dear Abbas, lies in the fact that you have grasped the weaknesses of your characters amid their strengths. You seem to have an uncanny, instinctive awareness of the dark side of the 'moon' coupled with a passion for the light. And if the 'moon' may in this context stand for the land of our heart's desire, our India, then surely you have brought to it the only kind of love which can redeem its present wretchedness and stretch out to its unexplored future. So that if there is a message in your stories it seems to me this: 'You cannot love India merely for its strengths but you have also to love it for its weaknesses.'

As that is the kind of feeling we share in common, permit me to greet you, brother writer, and let me hope that you will enrich our literature with more flowers of your sensibility.

Yours sincerely,

MULK RAJ ANAND

Bombay, Jan. 1st, 1947.



## RICE

Twisting like a serpent, creeping at a snail's pace, buzzing like a swarm of bees, two long queues—one of men, the other of women—were advancing towards the Government grain shop. The women's queue was even longer than the men's—quite a furlong in length, with its tail-end in a narrow alley round the street corner. Late-comers were taking their places behind each other. They did not get even a glimpse of the grain shop. All that could be seen was the head of the woman in front.

Several hundreds of women—Hindus, Muslims, Parsis, Christians, Jews. Muslim women veiled and unveiled. Fisher-women with black, shiny, healthy bodies, the fragrance of the flowers in their hair mingled with the unmistakable smell of fish. Bare-legged Goanese women in frocks. Anglo-Indian girls in artificial silk stockings and high-heeled shoes, reeking of cheap scent and powder. Plump, dark-eyed Jewesses with flowered shawls round their shoulders. Slim and lissom Marathi women, the tight grip of their saris revealing the contours of their bodies, and pale-faced Gujerati women who