

Reflections

Neena Katakya

Sulaiman, the old boatman, extended his wrinkled hand to help Jahnabi step into his dhow. This was Jahnabi's first visit to Dubai and she decided to get an authentic flavour of the Arab culture by taking a dhow-ride up the creek. She tried to balance herself and settled down beside a few Japanese and European tourists and Sulaiman slowly steered the boat away from the shore and began to move up towards the Al Maktoum bridge.

The clear blue sky dappled with a few white 'cottony' clouds was reflected on the blue waters of the creek and the boat left behind it a white V-shaped foam. The cool breeze blew on her face as Jahnabi looked at the reflection of the shimmering creek on the glass buildings along the bank. The boatman sat at the helm. He was wearing an off-white 'kandura' and a red and white 'gatra' on his head. There was something about his eyes that allured Jahnabi – they had the depth and kindness that only true wisdom can bestow. Jahnabi decided to go and sit near him – perhaps the old man had many tales to tell.

And sure he had! Through her many questions Jahnabi coaxed the boatman to narrate some fascinating stories. He began by telling her how, once upon a time, the Creek had separated the two sheikhdoms of Deira and Dubai. The Ruler of Dubai, H.H. Sheikh Sayeed had arranged that his son, Sheikh Rashid should marry the daughter of the Sheikh of Deira. The groom's party had to cross the creek in dhows. Sulaiman's father had been one of them. After the 'nikah' was over the groom and his men forcefully took over Deira and then Deira and Dubai were merged into one emirate. In return, Sheikh Rashid pledged that he would not take another wife and indeed he kept his word. When their daughter was married to the Ruler of Qatar, the benevolent Sheikh Rashid gifted the Maktoum Bridge to the people of Dubai. Later the Shindagha tunnel was built and then the Garhoud Bridge to connect Deira and Dubai.

Sulaiman was now enjoying his trip down memory lane and happy to have someone listening to him in rapt attention. He went on to tell her about how he and his entire family used to go to H.H. Sheikh Rashid's sons' weddings. Well, why not? The whole of Dubai was invited. Jewelry for the bride was conveyed in trucks!! A large field in front of the palace was decorated and illuminated with coloured lights and singing and dancing went on for days. To Jahnabi it all sounded as if it were straight out of 'The Arabian Nights'.

Sulaiman pointed towards a tall glass skyscraper surrounded by landscaped gardens. "That was where we used to have our 'barasti' hut. Of course, there was nothing but sand all around. In the evenings our fathers would sit in an outdoor majlis smoking 'sheeshas' and drinking 'gawa'. There were no proper roads. We used to do our shopping in the 'suq' and there was great excitement when the dhows came in up the creek from far away lands." Jahnabi was amazed that a man can see such a tremendous transformation in his lifetime. It seemed as if Alladin's genie had suddenly transformed this sleepy little desert town into a fairy tale modern metropolis, spotlessly clean, full of flowers, fountains, beautiful roads and buildings and friendly people from around the world!

Well, so much for Dubai, what about Abu Dhabi? Ah, yes. Sulaiman recalled how when he was a little boy, H.H. Sheikh Zayed's eldest brother, Sheikh Shakboot was the ruler of Abu Dhabi. The British had struck oil in Abu Dhabi and money was beginning to flow in. Sheikh Shakboot believed that money would spoil his people. At first he stored the money under his bed, then it began to fill up a whole room and then..... the silver fish got to it! Sheikh Zayed was the youngest brother and he had wonderful ideas and plans of how to make good use of the money. With the support of their mother and the rest of the family, Sheikh Zayed took over when his brother had gone to the UK for treatment. And, of course, since then Abu Dhabi has not looked back.

As the dhow neared Garhoud Bridge, Jahnabi could see the beautiful green lawns of the Golf Creek Club with the beautiful white 'sails' of the Club House. The sun was beginning to set and the sky became an artist's fantasy with shades of pink and purple. In the distance, the distinctive shape of the 52-storied Emirates Towers stood against the splendid backdrop of the sunset. The lights of the city gradually came on. By the time they returned it was almost dark. Thousands of lights were now reflected on the rippling waters of the creek. The beauty of the scene held Jahnabi spellbound. Even Sheherazade could not have imagined such a beautiful scene for her Arabian Nights!

Even as she was enthralled by the beauty of Dubai, why did Jahnabi feel a deep sadness? The last time she had been on a boat was on 'Jolkuonri' on the Brahmaputra in Guwahati. What Nature offered there was far more beautiful – the mighty river, the lush greenery, the magnificent Kamakhya



Hills – things that have so far defied human destruction. Assam has a wealth of resources, far greater than this desert land. Then what is it that has made Dubai a paradise while our towns and cities in Assam are ugly and dirty? Isn't it the people who are to blame? As Shakespeare so aptly says,

“The fault, dear Brutus, lies not in our stars,
But in ourselves, that we are underlings.”

Neena, who did her schooling from Loreto Convent, Shillong and Masters in English from Guwahati University, was a founder teacher of Udaygiri School in Guwahati and Lecturer in English in Handique Girls College, Guwahati. After spending a year and a half in the U.K., she now lives in Dubai with her husband Dr. Utpal, daughter Rohika and son Rohit (besides Lisa the dog and Puspus the cat). She is a senior teacher in Modern High School in Dubai and has a keen interest in literature, drama and elocution.

Experience of the Mighty Sandstorm

Syed Abdul Wakil

Sandstorms are natural occurrences in deserts. And where else in the world can you find an abundance of deserts but here in the Middle East. If countries in the North Pole and Antarctica are synonymous to ice, cold, snow, and other frozen things, then the Middle East is to sand, dust, heat, and other desert-related things.

And let it be known, the whole of the UAE is one desert of a country. Sand is everywhere and sandstorms are real. Tame and weak sandstorms happen maybe once a month; not enough for you to actually be aware of them or give them a passing thought, but enough for you to notice the hazy, polluted kind of look of the air.

My first experience of the might of sandstorm occurred last year (March,2003) . That month Dubai had a “real” sandstorm (or a dust storm, as they call it here) – one that cannot be ignored or forgotten by many, especially by someone like me who's never experienced anything like it. It happened when the US soldiers were also battling with the Iraqi Terrain and sandstorm there.

At around 5 p.m., totally bored surfing the Internet in our department building secured with finger print access, I suddenly got a mail from our bulletin board that most of the flights to Dubai would be diverted due to an in coming storm. I decided to go out to the main floor area of the emirates building. As I glanced towards our sliding entrance door, it looked like it was already evening, for the sky was already dark. Naturally, I thought my watch was not functioning properly, so I asked around for the correct time. It turned out that the time in my watch was right. This puzzled me, since during this time of the year, the sun sets very late, often at ten minutes before seven, so I knew something was amiss. Perhaps, I thought, it was going to rain and wished it would (that would have been a miracle). As my co-workers and I went outside and felt the hurtling sand all over our faces and bodies, only then did we realize that Dubai was experiencing one hell of a sandstorm. The sandstorm instantly turned the day into night like a partial solar eclipse!

I stood by the front area of our building, and in the strong ensuing force of the dusty wind, struggled to view the sights around (or if there was anything that could be seen). All the buildings on the horizon disappeared, entirely covered by the sandy haze. Not even the powerful lights on these buildings were able to project themselves through the dusty mist. (Since Dubai has an utterly clean air, lights from faraway buildings can easily be seen at long distances). Every driver had to slow down and turn on their vehicles' headlights to see the view in front of him, or else risk being in an accident. Visibility was at a hundred meters. Beyond that everything just faded into thick, grayish smoke of sand, dust and the gathering darkness. Visually, everything assumed a surreal appearance, as if you were looking at an old, hazy black and white photograph or a drab, gray-colored impressionist painting.

I went home both astonished and marveling at the experience of seeing an authentic sandstorm. Turned on the city FM where it said a car had been overturned in a traffic junction. Although the atmosphere of the sky was ominous like a typhoon about to wreak havoc on earth, I marvelled at it like an innocent child. The sand did get into my eyes, but somehow it also got into my heart for... it made me smile. In an instant all of the things that were happening around me and in my life felt like a dream. The sandstorm continued throughout the whole evening. So did my dreamlike feelings.

I went to bed early to escape the doldrums of this sinking, incomprehensible, lonely feeling. I wanted to have a peaceful sleep that night.

For the next morning, the sun shone bright as before, without any trace of the sandy event of yesterday.

Syed Abdul Wakil hails from Guwahati. An Electrical & Electronics Engineer, Mr. Wakil has specialized in computer programming. He is currently assigned to Emirates Airlines (Mercator Group). Mr. Wakil, new to Dubai, is married to Nazbin also from Guwahati.

