The Shadow That Breathes

A Life Story in Search of the Self

Basir Shafaq

(Boromand)

Andishe-Sazan Publications

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Biography

Abdulbasir Shafaq, son of Abdulsamad, was born on 4 March 1953 in a poor yet enlightened family in the village of Baqa Baraki Rajan, Logar Province, Afghanistan.

Shafaq is married and has seven children. He currently resides in the Kingdom of the Netherlands, where he sought refuge.

He has received higher education and possesses extensive knowledge in various fields. Further details about his life and activities are available on his personal website.

Abdulbasir Shafaq is a writer, poet, and seeker of spiritual truth. In addition to writing nineteen works of fiction exploring philosophical, literary, and mystical themes, he has authored five poetry collections that reflect his profound and introspective understanding of life and humanity. All these works have been published.

Four additional books, titled *Forty Nights of Solitude*, *The Inner Retreat*, *The Travelling Man*, and *End Point*, are awaiting publication.

He is currently working on a book titled *The Shadow That Breathes*.

Shafaq is also a member of PEN Nederland, the Dutch branch of the international writers' association dedicated to freedom of expression and literary rights.

Outwardly, he is a calm and reserved person; inwardly, however, he possesses a gentle, sincere, and compassionate soul. Getting to know him takes time, but once a friendship is established, it develops into a deep and lasting bond.

In his journey of spiritual exploration and self-discovery, Shafaq has drawn inspiration and guidance from the works of Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi and Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi, the great Persian mystic and poet.

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The Shadow That Breathes

“I did not write this book to prove what I know; I wrote it to confess how late I came to know my own origin.”

Preface

Sometimes, amid the crowd of voices, beliefs and ready-made answers, a person becomes lonelier than ever. Sometimes one hears so many answers that no living question remains; or, the other way round, so many questions take shape within that no answer can bring any peace.

This book is not the account of an ordinary life. It is the account of a journey from “faith” to “doubt,” from “certainty” to “collapse,” and from “emptiness” to a renewed search for meaning. It is the account of someone who grew up among pre-determined teachings, yet whose heart never found rest in them. Someone who tried to find truth within frameworks, and finally understood that truth has a personal path, sometimes a painful one.

Along this road there were moments when life no longer had any value; breathing had become merely a habit, not a choice. Days when “being” seemed heavier than “not being.” And it was precisely in those darknesses that small sparks, from thought, from reading, from reflection, slowly opened a way toward the light.

This book was written neither to prove anything nor to refute any belief. It is only the reflection of an experience: the experience of a human being who wanted

to know why he is alive, and whether it is possible to find, in the heart of this world, a meaning for going on.

If somewhere along this road you too have felt alone…
If you have ever asked yourself, “Why should I go on?”
Perhaps this writing is not merely a story.
Perhaps it is a mirror of some part of your own being.

Here begins the story of a “shadow” that still breathes…

> *A short note from a friend who asked that his name not be mentioned:*
>
> *“A writer is not someone who merely writes stories; a writer is someone who dares to speak the truth of his own life, however bitter. Then his story is no longer only his own; it becomes a mirror for every reader who one day asks: In all these years, have I been myself, or only a shadow that breathed?”*

The Shadow That Breathes

This book is the account of the hidden pains of a writer, “B. Sh.,” who has portrayed his own life here. Under the pen name “Boromand,” he begins the story of his life like this:

Nearly seventy years ago I opened my eyes on the world in one of the poor, hard-pressed families. I did not yet own a pair of trousers or a pair of boots when my parents, because of our circumstances and the prevailing beliefs, sent me to the mosque barefoot and half-clothed.

My father was a bold and hardworking man, and my mother a patient, kind and quiet woman, as if silence were her everlasting language.

In any case, off to the mosque I went. It was not long before they loaded me, like a silent porter, with various books of jurisprudence. My father looked at me with pride and pinned his hopes on my future, and my mother hoped in her heart that one day I might find work, earn some money, and perhaps buy trousers for myself and a chador for her.

Those were the days of my childhood: days mixed with tears, fear and ignorance. I did not yet know how to do

the simplest things, yet every day the mullah's stick came down on my head.

I, "B. Sh.," at seven or eight years old, woke every morning at four to make it to prayer. Though I had not yet properly learned how to perform ablution, I had to stand in the row of worshippers and perform the five daily prayers.

But hardest of all was going to Mullah Abdul Mutin, a place that was, to me, like hell on earth. With an empty stomach, bare feet and a weary body, I went to the mosque. Every time I was dismissed from the lesson, I told myself: "Today it is finally over." But this cycle went on for years.

Until I reached adolescence and read the great books of jurisprudence. I learned that a person is called to account after death, and that if his deeds are not good, he deserves punishment. These ideas multiplied my pains many times over.

Finally, at about eighteen, a question sprouted within me:

> *Will God, on the Day of Reckoning, also ask about my hungry belly and my father's calloused hands?*
>
> *And if so, what will our answer be?*

This question brought me face to face with different and contradictory answers. From that point on, I broke inside. I found myself abandoned between God and nature, and little by little I came to believe that I was nothing but a shadow…

A shadow that still breathes.

Chapter One

My childhood did not smell of play.

There were no dolls, no carefree laughter of children my age. My childhood days passed under the heavy shadow of anxiety, the anxiety of bread.

I went to school on feet that were sometimes hidden in old worn shoes and sometimes bare, cold and tired, touching the dust of the road. But with those same feet, with that same weariness, I walked to the end of the road.

When I finished school, fate, without asking me, sent me to the teachers' training college of one of the provinces. It was a decision that came from the government's plans, not from the wish of my heart.

Still, luck in those days was a little kind to me. The college had a dormitory, and I was among those who were granted permission to stay there. For the first time, the worry of bread grew a little lighter on my shoulders.

But another lack took its place: not having notebooks for my lessons.

In that place, the pain was not mine alone.

Each of us carried a hidden wound, and those very wounds drew us together. Very soon our scattered pains

became one shared pain, a pain called poverty, illiteracy and injustice.

A few people came, with words bigger than their years. They spoke of struggle, of change, of a world in which no one would go hungry.

I, who was hungry for that very world, believed their words.

I did not know what “struggle” was, but I wanted my stomach to be full.

I did not know how a “revolution” happens, but the dream of bread pulled me in every direction.

Little by little, words like “Marxism” and “Leninism” found a place in my mind, without my knowing their depth. I only felt that perhaps these were the road that would save me from hunger.

Sometimes I stood at the crossroads of the city.

I shouted slogans.

I read aloud, in a loud voice, poems that others had written for me.

They clapped.

And I, amid those voices, felt myself larger than I was.

When I was alone, I grew tall in my imagination.

Sometimes I saw myself as “Che Guevara,” sometimes as “Mahmoudi.”

While the truth was simpler than all these fantasies.

I still did not know even the alphabet of struggle.

But those fantasies built “another me” inside me: the me I wished to be, not the one I truly was.

In those days, Marxist books were forbidden.

To understand, I had to write down by hand whatever I heard. A hard, tiring and time-consuming task.

Yet I spent much of my time not on understanding but on being seen. I wanted to look good in others’ eyes; to be admired.

And how bitter it is when I think of those days today:

that I needed the applause of people who themselves did not have enough bread to eat.

But I had my reasons.

I had come to believe that this was the road to salvation.

I thought that if we succeeded, a day would come when no one would go to bed hungry; everyone would have bread, clothes, a home.

In my imagination I had become the caretaker of the whole world.

In reality, I was still nothing.

Still, wherever I went, I introduced myself as a “fighter,”

and called myself a “revolutionary.”

Years passed.

Alongside all these fantasies and slogans, I continued my studies.

But the truth was crueler than all those dreams:

on holidays I did not even have the fare to go home.

And this was a truth that no slogan could hide.

Years went by in this way;

back and forth across the field, days came and went, and we were lost among them.

Until one day it was decided that we would celebrate “International Workers’ Day” with special splendor. By then it had become the custom among us to call one another “comrade”; before every name came this prefix: Comrade So-and-so…

It was agreed that a spirited ceremony would be held at the crossroads of the city where the teachers’ college stood. In those days, alongside the “Khalq” and “Parcham” groups, another current called the “Islamic Movement” had formed and was strongly influencing the atmosphere of the college.

Among us, people such as Tor Alam Khan, Hawas Khan, Mirajan, Ghulam Rabbani and Zakim Shah played leading roles. The night before the ceremony, we secretly prepared banners and anti-government slogans.

The next day, when the ceremony began, the atmosphere very quickly turned tense. The police came into the crowd with tear gas and tried to scatter us. Smoke, shouting, running… everything was mixed together.

A few comrades received minor injuries. But the matter did not end there. At night the police came to the college and arrested two of us, Tor Alam Khan and Hawas Khan, and threw them behind prison bars.

On the other side, those who leaned toward the Islamic Movement were happy about this event, as if they had won a small victory.

But when morning came, we did not sit silent.

With red banners and anti-government badges, we gathered again, and this time went toward the gate of the provincial governor’s office.

We chanted:

“Release our comrades!”

I too was among that crowd,

small, trembling, and lost in the uproar;

like a baby sparrow whose wings the rain had weighed down.

But in my mind I was something else.

I imagined myself the savior of humanity.

I even took pride in standing before the gate of the governor, the highest government official of that province, and demanding justice.

Today, though, when I think of those days, a strange feeling of shame and humiliation boils up in my heart.

I say to myself: How did I become a follower of every voice?

How, to hear a single “well done,” was I ready to sacrifice even my life?

Finally, the government officials softened and released the detained students.

But we did not see the truth as it was.

We did not say “the government’s kindness”;

we said: “It was our power that saved our comrades.”

And this day, like many other days, passed…

But the effects of the tear gas had left several of our comrades severely dizzy, in pain and nauseous. We had no choice but to take our sick comrades to the hospital.

At the hospital, too, the medical staff treated us rather harshly. One of the emergency doctors, Dr. Ghafoor, said sharply:

“Russian mercenaries! Please do not drag this country to ruin.”

But we did not take these words seriously; we thought him a dark-minded and backward man, and even secretly mocked him.

Among the slogans I carried, one red cloth with large white lettering stood out more than all the rest:

“Bread, house, clothes,”

which was also written in Pashto: “Kor, Kali, Dodai.”

But later, after what was called the “victory of the communist revolution,” I saw a bitter truth:

instead of bread, bullets fell to the people’s lot;

instead of clothes, shrouds;

and instead of houses, graves.

It was there that a loathing of myself slowly took root in me.

In any case, our comrades were treated at the hospital and after two or three hours were all discharged.

From then on, the college officials also took a stricter attitude toward us. That so-called democratic atmosphere that had existed before had lost its color…

Days and years followed one another, and my life, too, was fleeting like a strong wind, sometimes full, sometimes hungry. In those days when I lived in the dormitory, I missed my family terribly: my father, my mother, my brother and my sisters. Although in the dormitory I ate the bread of obligation, I swear by God that it did not settle in my soul.

At that time my aim was to leap like a light-winged bird from branch to branch and find a place for myself. At last I was accepted into membership of the People's Party, and I was filled with pride and excitement.

One day, on one of the holidays, I returned home. At that time my family lived in the city of Kabul, in a rented house in one of its districts. My father, my mother, three sisters and my brother were all in Kabul. My father sometimes borrowed from this person and that, and my mother washed clothes in the house of one of the wealthy, at a time when washing machines did not yet exist.

Having heard a few fiery slogans, I began to boast with passion and excitement. I told my father: "Soon there will be a revolution in this homeland, this system will vanish, and a new government will be established, a government

that will provide the poor with houses, bread and clothes. Dear father, do not worry! I too am in the ranks of those who struggle against this government."

My father, a simple and elderly man, did not know the exact meaning of revolution and struggle. And I explained it to him with a mixture of truth and lies. He, thirsty for hope, clung to my words and was glad. I still remember the day he said to my mother: "Do not worry anymore, your son has become a fighter, he is involved in great affairs. God willing, one day he will reach a high position, perhaps become a governor or an officer, and then our life will change too."

But my poor father did not know that fate had another road in mind for us…

In the last year of my studies, before my father could see even one of those imaginary positions of mine, he closed his eyes on this transient world with an empty stomach. And I was left with my mother, my brother and my sisters, in a rented house in Kabul.

After the burial ceremony we returned to Kabul and rented another house. For years we carried on with life with difficulty, without a shelter of our own.

But this time I was no longer merely a student. I had become a teacher, I received a salary, and my mother no longer had to wash other people's clothes.

The time had now come to reconsider my imaginings and my beliefs. I had become a human being drained of meaning, ignorant of the truth of life. Just as I had named myself a "shadow," I truly was nothing but a shadow.

Meanwhile, the party committees gave me several novels and books, works that looked appealing, such as *The Crime of Humanity*, *The Slave Traders of the Twentieth Century* and *Gold in Copper*. Reading these books, without any experience of real life, I became so excited and so proud that I felt I could fly, like a fly that rises ever higher out of sheer conceit, only to end up as prey for a larger bird.

Little by little, everything I had learned in the past, from the books of jurisprudence to the lessons of Mullah Abdul Mutin, came to seem hollow and worthless to me. I even came close to losing my belief in God. Under the influence of Marxist thought, and Marx's saying that "religion is the opium of the people," I was drawn toward abandoning religion and faith.

I no longer prayed, no longer fasted, and had set worship aside. Before any revolution had even taken place, we, a group of passionate young men, already took ourselves for the saviors of humanity. Without knowing it, we had in truth become instruments in the hands of the great powers, followers of the social-imperialism of the Soviet Union, set against groups that were themselves attached to other camps.

When I look back now, I see that the name "shadow" was an exact choice for myself. I was like a firefly that borrowed light from every side but had none of its own. I considered every idea other than my own false, and I immediately set about tearing it down and exposing it.

Then one day, during a street demonstration, "Sidal," a well-known figure of the Islamic Party, was killed and a number of party members were arrested. I had not even

been present at that demonstration, yet I was so terrified that I seemed to be looking for a mouse hole to hide in.

After that, the government declared all unofficial parties illegal and said that no one had the right to hold demonstrations. But the leaders of the Khalq Party managed to register their party officially, and from then on their activities became more open. At the same time, certain Islamic movements took shape under names such as Jamiat and the Islamic Party.

The city of Kabul had become a stage for one demonstration after another. Every day, in the bazaars and on the roads, one group chanted against another. Behind this uproar, the world's great powers were also working to extend their influence in the region.

We, the small and unknowing members, wandered here and there amid all this like lost flies, with no idea what great game we had been caught in.

Finally, on 7 Saur 1357 (27 April 1978), the Khalq Party staged a coup. Before that, Mir Akbar Khyber, one of the party's prominent figures, had been killed, and his funeral became the spark that set the change in motion.

With the fall of the previous regime and the killing of the royal family, a new government came to power, one that called itself revolutionary. And I, like many others, without any clear grasp of the truth, put on a red shirt, grew a moustache, and tried to be seen by others as a "revolutionary."

The Revolution, or the Saur Coup: The Beginning of Afghanistan’s Misery

With the start of the revolution in Afghanistan, outside powers were quickly drawn in. The United States, and neighboring countries such as Pakistan and Iran, which were then experiencing new governments of their own, set to work. First they tried to sow discord among the leaders of the party, especially between its “Khalq” and “Parcham” wings. These rifts soon deepened and led to severe clashes, even physical brawls and the killing of well-known figures.

On the other side, these same countries, with financial and military backing, strongly reinforced the so-called Islamic groups. Guerrilla war began: brother against brother, countryman against countryman, blood against blood.

What I, the shadow, had said before had now become a bitter reality:

Instead of bread, bullets were being handed out;

instead of clothes, shrouds;

and instead of houses, ruin.

Defenseless and oppressed people, by the hundreds every day, without any knowledge of politics or the games of power, lost their lives, whether to a Russian bullet or an American one. In every case, it was the Afghan human being who was sacrificed.

Meanwhile Hafizullah Amin, the second president, seized power and removed Nur Muhammad Taraki. In the short period of his rule he spread an atmosphere of terror. At night, at the Pul-e-Charkhi firing ground, many people were executed as “counter-revolutionaries” or “miscreants,” many of them without even knowing what their crime was.

Some time later, Babrak Karmal, leader of the Parcham wing, came to power with the direct backing of the Soviet Union. With his arrival, Soviet forces also entered Afghanistan, and a new chapter of war and intervention began.

Under Amin, thousands of people were killed and thousands more waited for death in Pul-e-Charkhi prison. Karmal, as soon as he reached power, opened the prison gates and released many prisoners. On one hand this saved the innocent; on the other it strengthened the opposition forces and made the fire of war burn higher.

With the direct presence of Soviet forces, the violence took on wider dimensions. Innocent people, every day, in every corner of the country, were becoming victims of this conflict.

And I still cannot forget that day, the day my mother said to me, her eyes full of pain:

> *“My son, were these the people who promised us bread and a home? And were you one of these killers too?”*

When I heard my mother’s words, it was as if the last support inside me collapsed. I had already felt empty and meaningless, but this time I came to the conclusion that

perhaps there was no “I” at all, that what existed was only a shadow that moves after every voice and every slogan.

To win a single admiration, a single “well done,” and to fatten my “mental ego,” I had lost my truth and my identity. I had come to loathe myself so much that it was as if I faced a worthless, lost creature. But there was no way back.

The faith I once had, I had gambled away on the false slogans of “serving humanity.” On the other hand, the people of my village, now all armed and caught up in the war, did not consider me one of them. Among my party comrades, too, I had neither standing nor credit. I was a teacher, but alas, I had not even preserved the dignity of a teacher. I had lost everything on the road of selfishness and imaginary “egos.”

One of the bitterest memories of my life goes back to the days when the war between the Mujahideen and the government had intensified. The groups had multiplied so much that everyone seemed to have taken a separate road, yet the result of all of them was one: destruction.

One day my dear son Arian, who was only at the start of his youth, was wounded by rocket barrages. Twenty-seven small shrapnel fragments lodged in his frail, childish legs. At the same time, dozens of our neighbors were wounded too. One neighbor was gravely hurt by cluster bombs and died.

That day, my wife, who stood firm with all her being, and I took our son to the hospital. After twenty days of treatment he was discharged, but the pain was not over.

Every day I had to dress his wounds, and every day the sound of his crying tore at my heart.

Those sounds… are still alive in my ears.

And this suffering went on…

My son's pains had not yet healed when another disaster struck. My sister Fatima was badly wounded in her home by blind rocket fire. Sixty-four fragments of shrapnel and iron pieces were buried in her body. She was hospitalized for nearly two months, and her husband nursed her with devotion. But to this day one of her legs limps, and that pain has stayed with her.

This is only one example among thousands of pains that I and my fellow travelers, knowingly or unknowingly, imposed on a defenseless people. At the same time, other groups, in the name of religion and in order to protect it, carried out even wider massacres.

My purpose in writing all this pain is only one thing.

I had come to loathe myself.

I was still a "shadow," not an awakened human being; not a person freed from the chains of the "mental egos."

Despite all the suffering and catastrophes that fell upon the people, our leaders kept shouting from their podiums and presenting themselves as heroes of the nation. And I, I confess, was no exception to this inner selfishness and the deception of the "mental ego."

For years and years I was a follower of others, without any will of my own or the power to make an independent decision.

And today I say with all my being:

A curse on the imitation that shaped my life, a life whose bitter, heavy smell I still feel in my soul.

I went on along the path of my “mental egos.” I knew very well that I was hollow and empty inside; I had nothing of my own, and whatever I had once had, I had thrown to the wind. First I sold my beliefs to Marxism and Leninism, and now even that ruling group did not accept me. On every side I was left disgraced and defenseless.

One day I was on the road from Karte Nau in Kabul toward the city when suddenly the blast of a rocket tore through the air. A moment later a rocket landed on a house near me. That explosion took the lives of many people and wounded many more.

Fear took hold of my whole being. I abandoned my journey halfway and turned back toward home. On the way I saw a scene that will never be erased from my memory: caught among the branches of a tree beside the road was the head of a teenage girl, torn from her body by the blast…

At that moment it felt as though everything inside me collapsed. I said to myself:

If I and people like me had not started this false revolution, this game of mercenaries, would such disasters have happened? Would these so-called defenders of religion have taken human lives so mercilessly?

In that moment I decided to put an end to this shameful life.

When I reached home I told my wife of my decision. But she resisted with all her strength and would not let me do such a thing.

From then on, every day and every hour, I died many times and came back to life. With the death of every human being I collapsed within myself, and with the breathing of others I returned to life again.

This cycle went on…

But there was still no knowledge of myself.

I was the same shadow I had been.

A shadow that breathes.

* * *

I was still nothing more than a “shadow.”

In those days, a story from Mawlana Jalaluddin Muhammad Balkhi (Rumi) came alive in my mind: the tale of “Nasuh’s Repentance.” In those verses Rumi says: before you are disgraced before high and low, turn back from your sins and step out of the “mental egos” that have emptied you, so that you may find your true self.

In days long past there was a man named Nasuh. Because of his feminine face, he worked in the women’s bathhouse as an attendant, moving freely among the women. One day the governor’s daughter came to the bathhouse. When she had finished bathing, she discovered that the diamond of her earring was lost.

The doors of the bathhouse were shut. They searched everywhere but found nothing. Finally it was decided to search every person's body. Nasuh, a man among women, turned pale. He was certain that disgrace and death awaited him.

At that moment, from the depths of his heart, he repented, a true repentance, from duplicity, from deceit, and from the false "self" he had lived with for years. And God accepted his repentance.

The diamond was found and the danger passed from Nasuh. But he was no longer the man he had been; he was transformed.

From this tale Rumi warns us:

One who lives in the commanding self (*nafs-e ammara*) and in false mental egos is, in truth, like a shadow with no identity. Until he reaches the edge of ruin and disgrace, he does not wake. But if that awakening comes, he can return to his origin.

The verses of the *Masnavi* picture this transformation as follows:

> *"He wrote my name in the register of the pure;*
> *I was a denizen of hell; He granted me paradise.*
> *I sighed, and my sigh became a rope;*
> *the rope hung down into my well.*
> *I seized that rope and came out,*
> *glad, strong, plump and rosy-cheeked."*

These verses show how one honest sigh can save a human being.

But I…

No, I had not yet reached that stage.

I was still hiding among the shadows.

I still did not have the courage for that true repentance.

And this wandering went on…

Until one day…

One of the bitterest and most heartbreaking events of my life was the news of the killing of my sister and her husband.

One day I came home tired and heartbroken from work. My heart was full of pain, the pain of not understanding myself, and of wondering why I was still the same "shadow." When I entered the house, I found that a friend of ours from Logar province was our guest. After greeting him, I noticed that his face was drawn and sorrowful.

To ease the atmosphere I asked him to have green tea with me. Then I asked after my sister, her husband and their child. He was silent at first… but suddenly tears streamed from his eyes and slid down his cheeks.

I could bear it no longer. I said: "My dear friend Akhtar Muhammad Jan, why are you crying? Whatever it is, share it with me."

Wiping his tears, he said in a trembling voice:

"Uncle… Dr. Muhammad Rahim… they killed your brother-in-law."

I raised my head as though I could not believe it. I said: “Who? Why? He was a good man, a man of service… he even treated wounded Mujahideen. Why would they kill him?”

Akhtar Muhammad could no longer hold himself back. He wept aloud and said:

“They killed your sister, Salma Jan, too.”

In that moment it felt as if the world had fallen on my head. For the first time, my mother, my wife and I sat together and wept aloud.

Then he told the story like this:

In Logar everyone was armed, and an atmosphere of mistrust hung over everything. It was said that Dr. Muhammad Rahim carried a card or a note that accused him of cooperating with the government. This note fell into the hands of a wicked man, who handed it over to an armed group to win their favor.

One night armed men came to the doctor’s house on the pretext of having a patient, and took him away. My sister Salma Jan resisted and said she would not stay behind without her husband. One of the men said: “You must come with him too.”

They took both of them to a place far from home, near a forest by the river.

There… they killed my sister with dozens of bullets, and the doctor with a rain of them…

The next morning the people of the village went searching for them. After hours, they finally found both lifeless bodies and buried them in silence and grief.

When I heard this story, I collapsed inside myself.

Time and again I cursed myself.

Perhaps if I… if this wrong road… if this “being a shadow” had not been…

these two people of service would be alive today.

Their five-year-old child was left without a guardian, wandering from house to house for a morsel of bread.

And I…

I was still the same shameless shadow I had been.

* * *

I was still the same shadow I had been.

In my life the road changed many times, but I never arrived anywhere. Each time I thought I had found a way, I soon realized I had merely stumbled from one wrong turn onto another. I had no will of my own and no voice within me to guide me. Always something or someone outside me decided, and I followed without question.

A person without purpose is like a leaf in the wind;

he does not know where he came from, nor where he is going.

Sometimes such a person appears in the dress of faith, sometimes in the guise of struggle, sometimes in the face

of intellectualism, and sometimes in the shadow of power. But in all these forms, one thing is common:

he is empty inside.

I was like that too.

Nothing I learned in childhood was mine;

nothing I believed in youth.

I had accepted all of it either out of fear, or imitation, or the deceit of slogans that sounded beautiful but had no root in truth.

A person who is empty of himself is easily filled,

but not with truth, rather with whatever voice shouts the loudest.

And this is the most dangerous state.

Such a person, without knowing it, may become a tool,

a tool in the hands of those who have goals, though those goals are not necessarily human ones.

He fights without knowing why;

he defends without knowing what;

and he even kills without understanding what he is destroying.

And when one day he comes to himself, he sees that not only has he built nothing, he has also had a share in the ruin of what was.

Aimlessness is not only having no destination;

sometimes it is the beginning of a catastrophe.

For years I lived in such a state.

I had neither the courage to ask nor the strength to stand.

I fled from myself and hid among crowds;

but the more I hid, the farther I drifted from myself.

And perhaps the most painful moment is when a person realizes

that all these years he was not himself…

that he was only a shadow that others had cast on the wall of his being.

But is such a person condemned forever?

Perhaps not.

Perhaps this very awareness, this very confession of aimlessness,

is the first step toward return.

For one who knows he is lost

is closer to the truth

than one who believes he has arrived.

And I…

was still at the beginning of this road.

* * *

In those same days, while the wound of losing my sister and her husband was still fresh in my heart, my mother and my wife suggested that, to protect my life, I make

contact with one of the many Mujahideen groups and at least obtain a card so as to be safe from danger. But before this decision could be carried out, the scattered wars from all around reached the city of Kabul.

The city had sunk into terror. People paid enormous sums just to find a safe shelter, even a small hole. I too, not out of fear of death but out of fear of disgrace and loss of standing, tried to come to terms with one of these groups.

I was deeply troubled and lost. I tried hard to find a way in through one of these “saviors,” but it was no use, however much I tried.

Until the morning of 8 Saur 1371 (28 April 1992) arrived. I woke to loud cries of “Allahu Akbar” from every side. I understood that the Mujahideen had entered Kabul.

The first day I stayed hidden at home. On the second day I heard that all the prisoners, even dangerous criminals, had been set free. The next day, hesitant and afraid, I set out toward my workplace.

From a distance I saw a guard with a thick beard, worn-out clothes and a harsh face, standing at the gate of the office. For a moment I wanted to turn back, but fear of how he might react compelled me to go closer.

I greeted him.

Sharply, he asked: “Who are you?”

I said: “I am an employee of this office.”

He said: “There is no place for you here anymore. Go, and say your farewell for good. The Mujahideen run this place now, not you Communists.”

I nodded in acceptance and went into the office.

But what I saw was unbelievable.

From the mirrors to the telephone wires, from the tables and chairs to the typewriters and even the simplest office supplies, everything had vanished. That orderly, well-kept office had become an empty, plundered space. They had even carried off the soap and the toilet paper, in the name of “spoils of war.”

I stood there stunned, as if my mind had flown out of my head.

There I also saw three of my former colleagues. For a few moments we stood side by side, with nothing to say to one another.

From that day until today, I never returned to that office. With those friends, too, I have had only the occasional brief contact, and nothing more.

And I…

I was still the same shadow.

But this time, I had at least one thing with me…

That I had not gone with them…

And that, at the very least, I had not plundered the people’s property in the name of “spoils.”

Then the internal wars among the Mujahideen began, over the government properties they had seized as spoils,

and over territories. Now the wars took on a sectarian color: Shia against Sunni, Tajik against Pashtun, Hazara against Turkmen, a pure brew of disorderly mixtures. A government was formed in name only, while these same groups built trenches against one another in different parts of Kabul and defended them.

One day a friend told me this story:

“The office where I once organized the administrative affairs of the country had now become a hot trench full of weapons, rockets and bombs. Any living soul they spotted from afar, they hunted. Before looting a house, they would sell it to one another. For example, there was a house in Karte-3 in Kabul. The guards of that area sold this very house to one of their own elders, whom they called the ‘Commander.’ Can you believe it? For a sum of money they sold it. That powerful commander would come with his men and, in broad daylight, shoot the owners of the house, and afterward carry off the house’s goods and belongings under the name of ‘jihadi spoils.’”

The Afshar War

The Afshar War is one of the bloodiest events of Afghanistan’s civil war period. It took place during the fighting between various factions in the era of the “Islamic State of Afghanistan.” It occurred on Wednesday and Thursday, 21 and 22 Dalw 1371 (10 and 11 February 1993).

In this war, forces affiliated with the Islamic State of Afghanistan, including the Shura-e Nazar and the Ittehad-e Islami party, launched extensive attacks from

several directions on the positions of the Hezb-e Wahdat-e Islami of Afghanistan in the Afshar area of Kabul. Afshar lies in western Kabul, on the slopes of the mountains, and is counted among the city's predominantly Hazara districts.

According to reports from bodies such as the Afghanistan Justice Project and Human Rights Watch, widespread human rights violations were recorded during this operation. These include the killing of civilians, disappearances, torture, sexual violence, looting of property and the destruction of homes. What sets this event apart from other military clashes is the vast scale of violence against civilians.

Background to the war. After the fall of Dr. Najibullah's government on 8 Saur 1371 and the entry of the Mujahideen into Kabul, under political agreements, Sibghatullah Mojaddedi held power for two months and then Burhanuddin Rabbani for a transitional period. But the extension of Rabbani's presidency caused severe disputes among the various jihadi groups.

Hezb-e Wahdat-e Islami of Afghanistan was among the groups that opposed this decision. These disputes gradually led to military clashes between the Islamic State and Hezb-e Wahdat, spreading an atmosphere of mistrust and tension across Kabul.

The start of the attack. According to reports, before the operation began, meetings were held among senior military commanders to coordinate the attack on Wahdat's positions in Afshar. These sessions were attended by military and political figures and were aimed at planning the operation.

On 21 Dalw, rocket attacks and the use of heavy weapons began, and the next morning ground forces entered the Afshar area from several directions. After the collapse of Wahdat's defensive lines, the attacking forces entered residential areas and began house-to-house searches.

Scale of violence and casualties. Various reports give differing casualty figures. Some sources put the number of dead in the hundreds, others as high as thousands. Reports have also been published of the mass detention and mistreatment of civilians.

Many of these reports mention:

- mass killings
- torture and inhumane treatment
- sexual violence
- destruction of homes and the displacement of people

Eyewitnesses have also spoken of shocking scenes, including houses on fire, the killing of children and women, and the forced transfer of people to other areas. Some captives were released after payment of money, but the fate of many others remained unknown.

After the war. In the first weeks after the event, because of continued insecurity, it was not possible to collect and bury the bodies in an orderly way. Some families were forced to bury their loved ones in the courtyards of their own homes. Later, some of the bodies were buried in mass graves.

The event caused the widespread displacement of Afshar's residents. Many families migrated to other parts

of Kabul, and the area was left almost empty of inhabitants for a time.

Psychological and social consequences. The Afshar catastrophe left deep psychological scars on survivors. Many witnesses suffered mental disorders, anxiety and lasting trauma. The bitter experiences of this event have remained in the collective memory of the people for years.

Efforts at redress. After the event, talks took place between the warring sides for the release of prisoners and compensation for damages. Promises were also made to rebuild the area and pay compensation to the victims, but many of these commitments were never fulfilled.

With the passing of years, this event is still counted among the most painful chapters of Afghanistan's contemporary history, and discussion of it is always accompanied by sensitivity and grief.

As for Me, the Shadow That Breathed

These events left a deep mark on my spirit, so much so that at times I felt myself on the verge of madness. From every corner rose the sound of death, and every district had its own ruler. Each "king" had set his own law and his own passport for his domain, so that a poor human being, to pass along a short road, had to carry dozens of kinds of "permits" from different groups.

This situation wore down my soul and mind. Killing people had become a routine matter, as easy as breaking a branch from a tree.

I was still the same “shadow”…

But at least for not having gone down that road, I felt a little peace. Sometimes I told myself: “God forgive the former shroud-thief.”

This proverb comes from an old tale.

They say a man lived in the graveyards, and at night he would steal the shrouds of the dead and sell them. One day he died and another person took his place; but this one not only stole shrouds, he violated the dignity of the dead even further and committed even uglier deeds. From then on people said: “God forgive the former shroud-thief.”

Our own times had become like that…

Meanwhile, forced displacements had begun. Whichever ethnic group held power in an area forced the minorities to leave their homes. The market in human smuggling and human trafficking was hotter than ever.

One of those days I heard a bitter story whose memory still squeezes my heart.

A family decided to go to Peshawar to save their lives. A man named “Jandil,” from Makroryan in Kabul, promised in return for money to bring them safely there. But to deceive them, he said he must move the family in separate trips.

First he took two young daughters and their brother.

On the way, they stopped on the pretext of a breakdown. Shortly after, unknown armed men stopped the car and

questioned the young man. He said he was with Jandil, but Jandil, to save himself, denied him.

A few moments later, that innocent young man was killed…

Jandil took his two sisters away with him. The car, which had never broken down, turned onto a side road and carried them to a compound where humanity no longer had any meaning.

The fate of those two girls turned out in a way that is hard even to write…

Humiliation, captivity, and being traded like goods: these were part of the reality imposed on people in those days.

And I…

in the midst of all these catastrophes,

was still the same shadow who only watched, and burned,

but did not know how to become a “human being.”

* * *

When “Sado” and “Kado” reached home with them, in the Kacha-Gari area various whispers spread among the people.

Some said: “They’ve brought Communists.” And some women, in a tone mixed with envy and curiosity, said: “Look what pretty, lovely girls they’ve brought.”

Sado and Kado each forced a ceremony resembling a wedding with “Shahla” and “Sima.”

But those two girls, with tearful eyes, were left silent and defenseless in a merciless, foreign house, a place where no one paid any attention to their tears.

Jandil returned once more to Kabul to move the rest of the family of “Fath Khan Mansabdar” to Peshawar.

And I…

I was still the same shadow who only breathed,

without truly living.

My conscience was still asleep in negligence, though deep inside me a silent struggle was under way, a struggle to free myself from this swamp of fear and namelessness.

But I could not decide.

I was drowned up to my throat in “mental egos.”

Jandil went once more to the house of that man, “Fath Mansabdar,” in Makroryan 3.

The lady of the house, unaware of the truth, had prepared the best food for him.

He, too, won the hearts of his hosts with sweet, deceiving lies.

The next day, with a new trick, he said that this time he must take the family’s only remaining daughter, and so he did.

He took the helpless girl and sold her to a man named “Mado.”

But before that, for two nights in a row, the girl was forced to resist the oppression and assault of "Commander Zardad Faryadi" and to endure agonizing suffering.

Then she was forced into marriage with "Mado," and Jandil pocketed another sum as the price of this shameful deal.

By a coincidence of fate, "Sado" and "Kado" also lived in the same Kacha-Gari area, and the third sister was placed near them, in the house of Mado's father, Sufi Gul Khan.

But I leave these stories here…

My purpose in telling this bitter reality was not only to narrate the pain of others, but a confession of my own numbness, of my own being a shadow.

Later I wrote this tale in the form of a story called *The Merchants of the Century* and had it published.

But the truth is that even then, I was still the same shadow…

When my martyred sister was laid in the earth, the people of the area whispered among themselves:

"All of this is because of Basir…"

But "Basir," that is, I,

was still nothing but a shadow that only breathed.

Chapter: The Trial of the Self

And this went on…

Times had changed so much that not only did people no longer take me seriously, in some places they even looked at me with mockery.

Those who once addressed me with respect now passed by with a smirk; and I, silent and broken, was the lone witness to the collapse of those very idols I had built in my mind over the years.

Until one night, in a heavy and silent solitude, I came face to face with myself.

There was no friend, no voice, no gathering and no slogan.

There was only I, and the shadow that was left of me.

In the darkness of the room I asked myself quietly:

“Who were you?

And what are you now?”

Was I the proud Mr. Director?

Or the teacher who thought he would save the world?

The robed man who sat at the head of the gathering and spoke of revolution and humanity?

What became of all those names, titles and false honors?

Now that nothing remained for me but sorrow, regret and the tears of remorse, I finally understood that all those personalities were nothing but “mental egos,” masks I had worn on my face for years, hiding my real self beneath them.

The director was not my truth.

Nor the teacher.

Nor the revolutionary.

Nor the intellectual.

All of them were shadows…

And I had lived among shadows for years.

That night, for the first time, I wanted to be honest with myself.

I wanted to draw back the curtains and see my real face: the face of a tired, frightened, lost human being.

I sat in silence for a long time.

I talked with myself.

I fought with myself.

But my heart had not yet softened enough to weep.

The tears would not come…

It was as if my heart, from the force of its pain, had turned to stone.

In the end, suddenly, like a chained madman, I burst out laughing;

a bitter and terrible laugh, one that resembled weeping more than joy.

I laughed at myself…

at my whole life…

at all the beliefs I had once fought for.

And that same night I made a vow to myself to continue this solitude and this inner trial every night; perhaps one day, among these ruins, I would find my lost, true human self.

Chapter: The Many-Colored Skins

Now, looking back, I see that for nearly seventy years I lived as a person who was not “me.”

It is strange…

All my life I was running from myself and did not know it.

Sometimes I hid in the garb of a teacher,

sometimes in the guise of a revolutionary,

sometimes in the face of a religious man,

and at times in the figure of an intellectual who imagined he had found the truth.

But none of them was me.

They were only images that my surroundings, society, friends, fears and desires had drawn on the wall of my mind; and I, naively, served those images for years.

How painful it is that a person spends a lifetime decorating the prison in which he himself is captive.

I kept buying “skins” for myself;

many-colored skins.

One day I wore the skin of piety,

another day the skin of the intellectual,

another day the skin of struggle,

and another day the skin of learning.

But beneath all those skins hid a tired and lost human being, one who did not even have the courage to look at his own true face.

Today, when I think of the past, I sometimes ask myself:

How is it possible for a person to live with himself for seventy years and still not know himself?

What was this heavy sleep that swallowed me?

I had attached my heart to “names,” not to truth.

I lived on the praise of living people, not on the voice of my own conscience.

Whatever anyone said, I took a piece of it on my shoulders and imagined I had become “myself.”

While my real “self” lay buried far away, under the rubble of those very roles.

Until one day a saying of Ibn Arabi fell upon my soul like a thunderbolt:

> *“You are not what people say you are;*
> *you are that into whom God has breathed of His own spirit.”*

When I read this sentence, it felt as if my whole life collapsed before my eyes.

I said to myself:

If God breathed of His own spirit into the human being, then why have I spent all these years living as small, fearful, dependent and hollow?

Why, instead of discovering that divine truth, have I wandered all my life in the marketplace of false identities?

That night, for the first time, I felt that perhaps a human being is something greater than all his titles, parties, creeds and fears.

Perhaps a human being, before he is a “communist” or “religious” or an “intellectual,” is a lost spirit who must find himself.

And I…

I was still at the beginning of this search.

I was still the same shadow that breathed;

but for the first time, in the dark distances of my being, a faint light could be seen.

A light that softly whispered in my ear:

“Find yourself.”

Chapter: Purgatory Between Two Selves

Slowly I felt that something inside me was breaking;

something that for years had stood like a thick wall between me and the truth.

But at the same time, fear, too, had taken me in its arms with its last strength;

a strange fear, the fear of the collapse of everything I had spent my life calling “I.”

In those days the words of Ibn Arabi came to my mind like a breeze from somewhere far away.

He said:

> *“As long as a person is in the service of anything other than himself, he keeps breaking; for he has forgotten his true self.”*

These words shook me.

For years I had been in the service of the “other”;

the other than my own truth.

Sometimes in the service of a creed,

sometimes in the service of a party,

sometimes in the service of the fear of people,

sometimes in the service of name and fame,

and at times in the service of an image that others had made of me.

But had I even once been in the service of my “true self”?

No…

And this was why I broke a little more every day.

Even so, I had not yet come to the belief that “I am not what I imagine myself to be.”

I still thought that these very names, these titles, these labels were my truth.

When they called me “teacher,” I imagined that was who I was.

When they said “revolutionary,” I believed that was my truth.

If they called me “infidel” or “believer,” again I imprisoned myself in that same image.

While Ibn Arabi said:

> *“These are all barzakhs;*
> *a barzakh between the true self and the seeking self.”*

That was where I understood that a long road still lay ahead before my second birth.

I had not yet broken…

And until a vessel breaks, clear water is not poured into it.

Until the old, artificial walls are demolished, the sun does not find its way into the house.

But I was still alive beneath the rubble of those same walls;

beneath the layers of images I had made of myself and had guarded with obsession for years.

Sometimes I felt a human being inside me crying out to be free,

but that human being’s voice was buried under the uproar of the “mental egos.”

I still saw myself from behind masks.

I still did not have the courage to look at myself without a name, without a title, without a role.

And perhaps this was why the more I lived, the less I knew myself.

Now I was certain that most of my choices had not been my real choices;

they were choices that fear, environment, imitation and the desire to be accepted had made for me.

Even many of my beliefs were not mine.

I had borrowed them from others like old clothes.

And how painful it is when a person discovers, after seventy years, that perhaps he has not taken even one step on his own feet.

This awareness sometimes stirred a strange loathing for myself in my heart.

I came to hate myself;

not that “true self,”

but this wandering shadow that had lived in place of a human being all its life.

Yes…

I was still the same shadow that only breathed;

a shadow that knew neither the sun, nor itself, nor the way to freedom.

But perhaps this very pain was the beginning of awakening…

Chapter: The Handcart of Exile

By a twist of fate, destiny threw me out of my homeland;

a homeland that, though it carried the name of a “country,” in truth looked more like a poor and forgotten village.

A land with no proper electricity,

no clean water,

no sufficient bread,

and no clothing that smelled of dignity.

Whatever there was came from the charity of other countries, or from war, or from fear.

And we were a people living between slogans and graves.

The revolutionaries whom I too, at times, had raised my voice beside, were buried one by one in the graveyard of history.

The red banners were pulled down, and in their place green banners rose over the ruined rooftops of the city.

But however much the colors of the banners changed, the pain of the people stayed the same.

Only the names of the killers changed.

In those days, hundreds of people were beheaded on various charges;

some were called communists,

some infidels,

some enemies of Islam,

and some only for belonging to another group.

I too felt every moment that death was standing a few steps from me.

Fear, like a black shadow, was with me night and day.

Finally, to stay alive, I left my family temporarily and fled to Pakistan myself; the very place from which the Mujahideen had been fed for years and from which they were sent out to fight.

When I reached Peshawar, no one knew me as a teacher, a director or an intellectual.

There I was only a refugee;

a “Sakar-Bist”;

a contemptuous name they gave to displaced refugees.

For the first time, I understood that a person who loses everything no longer owns even his name.

A few days later, with a thousand fears and hardships, I brought my family of seven to Peshawar as well.

A new life began;

a life that resembled survival more than living.

At first I worked as a day laborer.

Every morning before sunrise, like tired workers, I waited at the crossroads in the hope that someone might take me for a day’s work.

My hands, which once held a pen, now lifted sacks and crates.

But an empty stomach forces a person to sell even his pride.

Later, with the little money I had saved, I bought a handcart.

From that day on, in the scorching lanes of Peshawar, I sold fruit and vegetables from a two-wheeled cart.

Sometimes grapes,

sometimes watermelon,

sometimes potatoes and onions.

I stood all day in the sun, calling out, so that perhaps a morsel of bread might be found for my children.

But the pain of exile was not hunger alone.

At night, when I returned home tired and broken, the Peshawar police would stop me.

Whatever I had earned all day, they took from me;

sometimes under the name of a fine,

sometimes because I was a refugee,

and sometimes simply out of contempt.

And I stayed silent.

I had no strength to protest,

and no place to complain.

Sometimes, in the dead of night, I sat beside my empty cart and thought:

Is this the same man who once spoke of revolution, justice and saving the people?

How quickly everything collapsed…

But the bitterer truth was that even in that exile and poverty, I still had not found myself.

I was still the same shadow that only breathed…

See How I Kept Changing Colors

When I entered the city of Peshawar with my family, the first thing I did, against my own wishes and inner belief, was to grow a long, thick beard. I wanted people to think I too was one of the Mujahideen, those men who walked the lanes and bazaars in long robes, prayer beads in hand, foreheads calloused from prostration. The Mujahideen of that time generally wore long beards and shaved their moustaches according to tradition. I adopted the same appearance, not out of faith but out of fear.

When I looked at my face in the mirror, sometimes I did not recognize myself.

It was as if another man stood before me; a man who believed neither in his past nor in his present. He only

wanted to stay alive, even if, to stay alive, he had to put a new mask on his face every day.

Most of the time at the mosque I made my way to the first row of prayer.

I made acquaintance with Sufis, mullahs and people of the khanqah. I recited *dhikr*, nodded my head, and sometimes pretended as if I had been on this path for years. But the truth was that inside me there was neither peace nor firm faith. All of it was only a performance; a performance to escape death, to escape the color of being a “communist,” so that no one would recognize me and say: “This man is a remnant of the former regime.”

But however much a person tries to deceive others, in the end he cannot deceive himself.

Outwardly I had grown a beard, I prayed, I recited *dhikr*, and with my tongue I spoke of religion; but inside I was the same lost and wandering man. The same shadow that for years had drifted between various slogans, between red and green, between Marxism and jihad, between fear and pretense.

And the people were not naive either.

Sometimes I overheard them whispering to one another from here and there:

“This one is a Sakar-Bist… a remnant of the infidel regime, of the communists.”

These words went into my heart like a silent dagger.

I had no place among the Mujahideen, nor did I belong to my past any longer. In every gathering I was a stranger; a man without roots, without identity, without peace.

Days and nights passed in Peshawar.

In the mornings I worked for a morsel of bread, in the afternoons I pushed a cart of vegetables and fruit, and at night, tired and broken, I returned to my small, damp room. But with all this hardship, I still never dared to make a journey into myself. I never sat down to ask myself: “Who are you, really?”

I had only changed my appearance, not my inside.

I had taken refuge from the garb of the party in the garb of religion; from red slogans I had arrived at prayer beads and prayer rug, but I was still the same hollow and empty man. I was still the same shadow that only breathed, without having known its own truth.

Now that years have passed since those days, I understand that the greatest deception was not deceiving the people; it was deceiving myself.

I spent my life building faces, none of which was the real “me.” One day the revolutionary teacher, another day the pseudo-Mujahid, one day the intellectual, one day the pious man, and one day the fugitive and refugee. But behind all these faces stood a human being who had still not found himself.

And perhaps this is the most painful truth of life:

that a person can breathe all his life, but never live.

And I too, in Peshawar, Pakistan, seeing the true face of the Mujahideen and the Pakistanis who had wrought such calamities in my country, who killed people and fed human flesh to human beings, thought to myself that these could not be human beings, but:

respected wolves, people who, in the name of defending Islam and under the pretext of protecting religion, had dragged our land and nation into the abyss of ruin; and fortunately, at least, I was not among them, though my own revolutionary comrades, too, had shot hundreds of people at the Pul-e-Charkhi prison firing ground.

In the contemporary history of Afghanistan, names appeared under this title that introduced themselves as “defenders of Islam,” but behind these slogans they brought ruin, bloodshed and great instability on the people of this land. In the name of defending Islam, these groups targeted the integrity of the land and the unity of the nation, and set the country on a road full of blood and fire. While many Afghans had taken refuge in the lap of religion in hope of security and peace, these claimants, through misguidance and abuse of those beliefs, launched a ruinous war.

Those who once ruled the people in the name of religion are today drowned in millions of dollars of wealth, while the people have inherited only pain and poverty. This 44-year war, whose traces remain in every corner of Afghanistan, instead of leading toward unity and progress, only caused deeper rifts in the heart of society. They were wolves in the guise of religion and faith, who cut the jugular vein of the nation and spared no betrayal along the way.

But today, many questions remain in people’s minds: Was this war truly for the defense of religion and land, or only a tool for gaining power and wealth? These are questions that, with the passing of time, will remain more than ever in public opinion and in the minds of future generations. And what is certain is that along this road, Islam, as a lofty value, was sacrificed, and the people of Afghanistan, instead of peace and comfort, experienced only war and ruin.

But I, understanding all these pains and sorrows, which I both felt myself and saw among the displaced and wandering people, was still the same shadow that only breathed. Alas, and woe to me.

Though I knew well that our nation is not sick, but wounded; wounded by long years of war, betrayal, poverty, bigotry and the bloody games of power. A wound on which salt has been sprinkled every day; sometimes in the name of religion, sometimes in the name of freedom, sometimes in the name of ethnicity, and sometimes in the name of intellectualism.

I had seen with my own eyes how this land was wounded not only by the gunmen but also by the sellers of pens. Those who once took up the pen to awaken the people later rented that same pen out; for fame, for money, for the approval of embassies and foreign intelligence services. One, in the name of defending his ethnic group, sowed seeds of hatred; another, under the name of religion, kindled the fire of enmity; a third distorted history so much that it seemed this nation had never known the color of brotherhood.

Little by little I understood that many of these seemingly enlightened figures write not for truth but for division. They eat bread from the people's pain and build credit for themselves from the tears of orphans. On the surface they speak beautiful words, but inside they scratch at the soul of society.

But the truth was that Afghanistan was not sick; this homeland was wounded.

Wounded by those who each, in the name of salvation, thrust a dagger into its body. One with a rocket, one with a slogan, one with a fatwa, and another with a pen.

The cure for this land was neither hatred nor revenge.

The cure for this nation was only empathy and shared understanding.

A true intellectual is not one who sets people against one another; an intellectual is one who builds bridges between broken hearts. A committed writer is not one who writes for the applause of foreigners; he must write for the comfort of the grieving mother, for the orphan child, and for the future of the people of this land.

I understood this truth late; very late.

Amid all that turmoil and blood and slogans, I had only just realized that if a person's heart does not beat for all his people, however much he speaks of freedom and justice, he is still captive to his own selfishness and his "mental ego."

But the great pain was that, despite understanding all this truth, I was still the same shadow that only breathed.

I still lacked the courage to step out of the masks entirely. In a corner of my being, fear, hypocrisy and the selfishness of the self still breathed. Sometimes I wanted to cry out against my past, but a voice inside me said: “You too were part of this same darkness.”

Yes, alas and a hundred times alas for me.

I should weep for myself, not for others.

I should curse myself, not praise myself.

For a person who lives seventy years and still has not found himself, what does he have but regret?

And a person who spends his whole life in shadows, though he breathes, is still deprived of true life.

Now I understand that the greatest catastrophe for a human being is not losing his homeland;

it is losing himself.

The Voice at the Shore

One evening, as the air slowly darkened and the lights of Peshawar glittered in the distance like tired stars, I left the house.

I walked aimlessly, like a man who has neither destination nor hope. I only wanted to escape, for a few moments, the clamor inside me. From fear, from memory, from the past, and from that shadow that for years had clawed at my soul.

For a long time I walked the lanes until at last I found myself at the shore.

Night was settling slowly on the water, and the sound of silent waves seemed to speak with my broken heart. In that moment, for the first time, I dared to be alone with myself for a little while.

Though I still feared being chased by the Peshawar police, and every passerby's footstep made me tremble, that night it seemed something inside me wanted to break.

I sat by the water, lowered my head, and for the first time I heard silence. A silence louder than a thousand cries.

Suddenly, from the depths of my being, a voice rose;

a quiet voice, but piercing.

I felt it was speaking to me from far away, from the depths of centuries.

It said:

> *"I am Ibn Arabi…"*

My body trembled.

I did not know whether this voice was imagination or truth, but whatever it was, it pierced my heart.

The voice spoke again:

> *"Know that every human being has two souls;*
>
> *one is that pure and true soul that joins him to his origin; a soul kneaded from the light of truth, and if a person knows it, he reaches peace.*

But the second soul is the opportunistic, fearful, outwardly comfort-seeking and selfish one; the very thing that in mysticism is called the "shadow," and in the world of mind and psychology is called the "mental ego" or the "false self.""

I was silent and stared at the water.

I felt as if someone were drawing back the thick curtains of years from before my eyes.

The voice went on:

"You have spent fifty years of your life, yet you still live in the shadow.

All these years, the one who decided, feared, chanted slogans, changed colors, fled and pretended was not your true self; it was the shadow.

You have still not come to know yourself.

And a person who does not know himself, though he may hold a thousand names and ranks, is still lost."

At that moment my heart tightened as if my entire past had fallen on my shoulders at once.

I remembered all those years;

the days I considered myself a revolutionary, the days I hid in the garb of piety, the days I put a thousand faces over my face out of fear of death.

The voice said again:

“If one day you come to know yourself, perhaps you will weep over yourself; perhaps you will even curse yourself.

But it is not yet too late.

As long as a person breathes, the way back is not closed.

Turn back from the road the shadow has set for you; find the road of truth, so that you may taste the pleasure of the soul, not the pleasure of deceit and pretense.”

I was shaken to the core.

I felt something crack inside me;

as if the wall that had stood for years between me and the truth trembled for a moment.

But alas…

with all this awakening, I was still the same shadow.

I still had not come to know my true self.

I was still captive among layers of fear, habit, pretense and mental egos.

That night I sat by the shore until late.

The water flowed, the night was silent, and I was a man who had only just realized that he had spent his whole life in the prison of his own shadows.

And perhaps this is the most painful prison; and most important of all was this sentence, which my inner voice said to me: *“This is neither heaven nor hell; rather they*

are two everlasting powers, both of which God has placed within every human being. One of these forces guides a person on the road of truth and brings him to God, and the other is the voice of the ego that keeps you in the shadow, and in this prison you imagine that you are living. No, this is not your life. This life is that of the shadow."

The prison of a human being who holds the key to freedom within himself, but does not have the courage to open the door.

I understood exactly, and in every sense, that the worst prison is not a prison of stone and iron; the worst prison is the prison of the human mind. And that too, a mind whose commands are issued by the "mental egos," not by an awakened conscience and the true self.

For seventy whole years I walked this road. I walked with pride and told myself I was free; but today I understand that this freedom, too, was nothing but a deception. I only imagined I was free, while like an invisible captive I lived in the bonds of thousands of thoughts, beliefs, fears, prejudices and imitations.

In the course of my life I saw many scenes: I saw killings, I saw looting, I saw injustice. I saw how for every wrongful act a sacred name was chosen so that its ugliness would stay hidden. Theft was called "spoils," rape was justified with jurisprudential terms, violence was called "jihad," and revenge was dressed in the garb of piety.

I myself did not commit many of those acts, but I was a witness to them. With my own eyes I saw, and with my

own mind I understood, that these behaviors were not compatible with humanity, with conscience, or even with the spirit of religion. I understood that pain is pain; it makes no difference on which ethnic group, which creed, or which human being it falls.

But the problem was that understanding was not enough.

I was captive in the prison of my own mind. Captive to the same shadow that had ruled my life for years. A shadow that decided in my place, feared, imitated, and lived to win others' approval.

Today, looking back, I see that even now that shadow sometimes comes alive in me. Sometimes I become the shadow of my wife, sometimes of my children, sometimes of my friends, and sometimes of the thoughts of society.

For example, someone tells me: "Respect so-and-so." And without asking myself whether this respect rises from my own heart or not, I do the same. Not out of knowledge, but out of habit, fear or consideration.

On the surface this seems a small matter, but in truth it is the sign of a deeper illness: the illness of lacking independence of thought.

Independence of thought does not mean that a person opposes everyone; it means that he makes every decision after awareness and understanding, not out of blind imitation.

Now I understand that as long as a person's thinking is indebted to others, as long as others manage his feelings, as long as he chooses his values out of fear or imitation, he has not yet reached his real self.

Such a person may walk, speak, laugh, cry and even live many long years, but in truth he is still a “shadow”; a shadow that breathes.

Perhaps the greatest mission of a human being in this world is neither accumulating wealth, nor gaining position, nor winning the praise of others; but knowing himself. For when a person knows himself, he is no longer easily made a tool in the hands of ideologies, leaders, prejudices and fears.

And I, the narrator of this story, though seventy years of my life have passed, am still learning this lesson, a lesson I wish I had learned in my youth: that until a person gains independence of thought, however free he considers himself, he is still a prisoner; and every prisoner of the mind is nothing but a shadow that breathes.

The Shadow of Nations

The more I looked at my life, the more I came to the conclusion that being a shadow is not unique to an individual; sometimes a nation, a society, and even a country can appear in the role of a shadow. This thought may be right and may be wrong, but years of experience and what I had seen with my own eyes had brought me to it.

We live in an age when the world grows more complex every day. Great powers, through capital, technology, media and politics, affect the fate of many nations. Sometimes I thought to myself: among all these countries, how many can truly decide without outside

pressure, and how many, willingly or unwillingly, must align their course with the will of the great powers?

I thought of my birthplace. Ever since I could tell my right hand from my left, I had seen that governments came and went, but dependencies remained. One day it was called friendship with the East, another day cooperation with the West. Leaders changed, flags changed, slogans took on new colors, but ordinary people were still struggling with poverty, war, migration and insecurity.

I am not a historian and do not claim to know the whole truth, but from my own viewpoint I saw that many of our rulers, more than relying on their own people, had pinned their hopes on outside support. Each, in one way or another, revolved in the orbit of a greater power, and this reminded me of a person who thinks he is free, while invisible strings pull him from every side.

In those days I asked myself: What is freedom? Is having a flag and a national anthem enough? Can a country that cannot provide bread, work, education and security for its people consider itself fully free? Will a people who always look to others for help feel real independence?

Of course, later I understood that the matter is not so simple. No country in today’s world lives completely apart and independent of others. Even the great powers depend on one another. But the difference is that some nations cooperate while preserving their dignity and will, and others sink so deep into dependence that they no longer hear their own voice.

Little by little I realized that just as a person can live for years captive to mental egos and false images, a society too may be caught in the captivity of fear, bigotry, poverty and dependence. By then, being a shadow was no longer my problem alone; I saw shadow-being in the faces of many people, institutions and even nations.

But the bitterer truth was that before speaking of the shadow-being of others, I had to confess my own. For how can a person who has not yet known himself define freedom for others? I had spent seventy years of my life in search of names, positions, creeds and groups, without knowing the true owner of this life.

In those days I came to the conclusion that perhaps the greatest freedom is neither political freedom nor economic freedom, but freedom from the prison that a person has built inside himself. One who has not been freed from fear, imitation, bigotry and self-deception, even if he lives in the freest country in the world, will still be nothing but a shadow.

And I, with all these thoughts and confessions, was still the same shadow that breathed; a shadow that had only just understood that the road to freedom begins with knowing oneself, but still had a very long way to go before reaching it.

And note, most important of all, that in recent years, especially on social media such as Facebook, Instagram and other networks, I witnessed a phenomenon that plunged me into deep thought. A group of my compatriots were trying to separate themselves from the name “Afghan” and put other names on themselves instead, among them “Khorasani.” I had no enmity with a

name, nor with history, but I asked myself: With the change of a name, does the truth of a human being change too?

I, who had spent a lifetime in the captivity of shadows, saw the traces of those same shadows here as well. Many of us have still not learned to be human, still have not made peace with ourselves and with one another, still have not passed beyond ethnic, linguistic, religious and group prejudices; yet we are intent on giving ourselves grand names and building glorious identities for ourselves.

I asked myself: Khorasani, Afghan, Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, or any other name, what difference does it really make in the creation of a human being? Does human blood come in different colors? Does the tear of a mother from another ethnic group taste different? Does the pain of hunger, fear, migration and death differ among different peoples?

The more I thought, the more I came to the conclusion that many of us are still captive in the prison of names and labels. Sometimes we make names greater than the human being. Sometimes we place ethnicity above ethics and turn religion into a means of division, when humanity should come before all of these.

Throughout history I have seen countless examples. There have been groups who considered themselves the chosen people, nations that counted themselves superior to others, governments that waged war and shed blood in the name of race, language, religion or civilization. But what has been the fruit of these claims to superiority? Nothing but the ruin of cities, the displacement of

nations, countless graveyards, and generations that grew up with deep wounds of the spirit.

Sometimes I feel that humankind still has a long road ahead before it knows itself. Humans have managed to travel to the heavens, build intelligent machines, penetrate the depths of the seas and uncover many secrets of nature; yet they have still not managed to know themselves properly. They still use name and ethnicity and language and religion to build walls, not to understand one another better.

Perhaps this is why, the more I look at my own life, the more I see that most of us, myself included, have lived for years in the form of shadows. Shadows who think they have found the truth, while they are still at the beginning of the road. Shadows who speak of superiority but are unable to know themselves. Shadows who shout for freedom but have not been released from the bonds of prejudice and imitation.

I too was one of those shadows. A shadow that breathed for seventy years, spoke, grew angry, loved, made enemies, passed judgment and many times considered itself in the right; but the more I looked into the mirror of my own interior, the more I realized that I still have a long road ahead before becoming a human being.

Perhaps a day will come when people, before introducing themselves by the name of an ethnic group, language, religion or land, will say with pride: “I am a human being.” And that will be a day when many of these shadows will have drawn near to the light. But until then, I am still the same shadow that breathes and wanders in search of its own self.

That night I stayed awake until late. The voices of people came from the lanes, the sound of cars, the sound of life; but inside me a heavy silence reigned. I thought that perhaps the greatest misfortune of a human being is not to be poor, or to become a refugee, or even to lose his loved ones; the greatest misfortune is to lose himself and not know who he is. For long years I had taken names in place of myself; one day I was a teacher, one day a director, one day a party man, one day a refugee, and one day a man who changed a thousand colors out of fear for his life. But now, looking back, I saw that none of them was the real me. They were all like clothes that I had put on and taken off again, but I had never known the owner of those clothes.

At that moment I felt a small door opening inside me. The light was still faint, the road still long, but for the first time, instead of blaming others, my gaze had turned toward myself. I understood that a person who spends his whole life blaming this one and that one never finds the chance to know himself. For years I too had condemned governments, leaders, parties, wars and enemies, but I had rarely asked myself what my share was in this wandering. That night, for the first time, the shadow that breathed dared to take a step toward the human being hidden behind it.

That night, after hours of thought, I felt for the first time that my real enemy had not been governments, nor wars, nor migrations, nor even those who humiliated me. The main enemy had lived inside me for years; the same being who dressed me in a new garment every day and kept me from seeing the truth. One day it had put the garment of the revolutionary on me, one day the garment

of the intellectual, one day the garment of the pious, and one day the garment of the victim. But beneath all those garments sat a human being who still did not know himself.

I remembered that all my life I had been afraid of the judgment of others. Much of what I had done, I had done not out of belief but out of fear. Fear of being cast out, fear of being left alone, fear of being accused, and even fear of thinking. Now, looking back, I saw that a great part of my life had been run by fear. Fear was that silent jailer who had left the key to the prison in the prisoner’s own hand.

Slowly I understood that as long as a person lives through the eyes of others, he never tastes freedom. He may read thousands of books, chant thousands of slogans and speak thousands of times of freedom, yet remain a captive. Captivity does not always have iron chains; sometimes the chain is made of creed, sometimes of prejudice, sometimes of fame, and sometimes of the image a person has made of himself.

For years I thought that knowing the world was the most important duty of a human being; but now I saw that knowing oneself is harder than knowing the world. The world can be seen with the eyes, but the self must be seen with honesty. And honesty was the hardest test I had faced until that day.

In the silence of that night, suddenly this question sparked in my mind: If they take away all my names, if they take away all my titles, if they separate from me my ethnicity, creed, party, rank, property and past, will anything of me remain? And if it remains, what is it?

I did not know the answer to this question. But for the first time in my life I felt that perhaps my whole seventy-year journey had been in search of the answer to this one question. A question that for years had been buried under the clamor of war, politics, migration, fear, and small and great ambitions.

And I, the same shadow that still breathed, understood in the darkness of that night that the road to self-knowledge does not begin with knowing; it begins with confession. A confession that perhaps everything I knew about myself had been only a story I had told myself for years.

The Verses of Mawlana

One evening I turned to the *Masnavi* of Mawlana, and these verses of the great Rumi caught my mind; I became one hundred percent certain that I was still a shadow. Here are the verses:

> *"Whoever says 'I am he' did not become he;*
> *his ear of grain was not fit for the threshing floor.*
> *Do not be 'I'; depart from 'I' so that you may become 'I';*
> *become a wheat-ear, so that you may be fit for the harvest."*
>
> *Poet: Mawlana*

> *My thought all day, and my speech all night, is this:*
> *why am I heedless of the state of my own heart?*

Where did I come from? What was my coming for?
Where am I going? Will You not show me my homeland?
I am left in deep wonder: for what reason was I made?
Or what was His purpose in this making of me?
I speak of that which belongs to the exalted world;
I am resolved to cast down my baggage there.
I am a bird of the garden of the Unseen, not of the world of dust;
for a few days they have built a cage out of my body.
Who is that ear that hears my voice?
Or who is it that speaks within my mouth?
Who is in the eye that looks out through the eye?
Or what soul is it, tell me, whose shirt I am?
Until You show me, in truth, the station and the road,
I will not rest a moment, nor draw a single breath.
Give me a taste of the wine of union, so that in this eternal prison
with one drunken cry I may break everything apart.
I did not come here of my own accord, that I should return of my own accord;
the One who brought me will carry me back to my homeland.
Do not imagine that I speak these verses of myself;

while I am sober and awake, I do not utter a single breath.

And truly, since I was still a shadow, I came to hold the opinion that when human beings become shadows and are no longer themselves, they are in truth the wildest creatures in the world. Perhaps this view of mine was itself a shadow. In any case, I will quote here what I once wrote on this subject:

The Wildest Animal in the World

At the mere mention of the phrase “the wildest animal in the world,” many of us think of the cold forests of Siberia or the dense jungles of the Amazon. At first one might ask whether the wildest of creatures are predators such as the lion, the tiger or the wolf. But in my view, in the twenty-first century this title should belong to the human being. For it is only the human being who seeks the ruin of the natural world and of living creatures, and does so not for survival or self-defense, but out of lust for power and profit.

Today’s human being, who was supposed to possess reason and awareness, has emerged in the modern world as the true “wild animal.” He who was once known as “God’s vicegerent on earth” has today broken and thrown away the crown of dignity that God had placed on his head. Instead of seeking moral growth and elevation, today’s human being seeks power and domination.

This human creature is not only intent on mastering nature and plundering natural resources; he also plots the conquest and destruction of weak and poor countries.

Countries with neither economic strength nor the power to defend themselves. While powerful countries spend billions of dollars producing deadly weapons and technologies of mass killing, what is all this money for? To destroy wild animals? Certainly not. It is for the slaughter of innocent and oppressed human beings. This bitter reality shows that today's human being, more than at any other time in history, has become a wild and dangerous creature.

And perhaps in this criminal course the human being will go so far that one day he will use nuclear weapons and write the end of the world. On this road, the great powers of today have not only obtained deadly weapons but have also entrusted their power to intelligent robots and machines. Robots that have no feeling, no fear, no compassion. They are able to kill human beings with merciless precision. The clearest example of such robots is the unmanned drones, which identify their targets and bomb them and then return home, without any concern for moral or human consequences.

In the end, it can be said that today's human being, as an intelligent creature, has not only separated himself from the natural world but, by exploiting scientific and technological achievements, has become one of the most dangerous and ruthless creatures on the face of the earth. For this reason, the title "the wildest animal in the world" rightfully befits the human being, because only he, in the name of progress and civilization, is destroying himself and other creatures.

And I had come to believe that it is precisely human beings who are still not themselves, and even countries

whose rulers are the slaves of other countries and have no respect for themselves or for the dignity of humankind, who may be like this.

But fortunately, hardly a moment had passed when this very story took hold of me, and I said to myself: if only I could have lived in the great world of love, and if only I had acted on that story of mine from thirty years ago. That story went like this:

A Story from Thirty Years Ago

The rain was falling softly. The lanes were empty, and the wind now and then carried a dry branch from one place to another, like memories that stay somewhere in the heart but shift about, without permission.

He came. Not with clamor, not with the sound of footsteps. Only with a gaze that had walked a thousand years on foot. He had a dust-colored shawl on his shoulders and his shoes were muddy, but in his eyes a lamp still burned; a dim light, but alive.

Someone was behind the window. Perhaps you. Perhaps someone who years ago had said: “If you come, I will still be the same.” But the seasons had passed, the words had faded, and the windows had grown used to having no voice.

But he came. If his feet had stopped, his heart still stood. His hands were empty except for

one old notebook in which only one poem was written:

“To come to the lane of your street is a necessity for me;
if my feet give out from walking, I will come on my head.”

He stopped. He looked at the window. He smiled; the way only true lovers know how. Not out of hope, not out of waiting. Only for a greeting that, perhaps, on the heart of the wind, might reach you.

And then, without waiting for any reply, he sat on the same step. And the rain, like a heart whose grief has opened, wept without a sound…

The woman stood motionless behind the window. Years had passed, and her heart would not wake from the sleep of memories. But tonight something was different. Tonight the sound of the rain was his voice. The same man who had said, “If you come, I will still be the same.”

The poem she had written on the window was not yet erased. With a trembling finger, on the steam of the glass, she had written only three words:

“Have you come… or am I dreaming?”

The man raised his head. Not as an answer, but because his heart was drawn. He felt that

something from inside the window had reached his heart. He put his hand on his chest, as in the old days, and with lips trembling with grief, he said without a sound:

“Neither dream, nor shadow. Only your heart… the one you left behind.”

The woman blinked. Her eyes filled with mist. She remembered that last night, the man had said: “If one day no trace of me remains, I will become a poem, behind the door of your house.”

And now… he had become a poem. He sat right there, wet with rain, with eyes that had traveled for years.

The woman opened the window softly. The wind crept inside. A silence fell between them that was more intimate than a thousand words. The man smiled and said:

“I am late, I know. But I still know how to speak with the heart. I still know how to recite: Open your eyes, for your singer of ghazals has come on the road.”

The woman said nothing. She only bowed her head, and a drop of rain settled on her eyelash. Or perhaps it was a tear. It did not matter. What mattered was only this: that tonight, the heart had come home.

But unfortunately I was neither like this nor like that; to this very day I am the same shadow I was. For I was my

mother's shadow and my eldest sister's, and I could not go to my beloved. Only my tears, in my seventieth year, did I give her as an address, tears I had shed beside the window of that beloved's father. If only I had stepped out of the state of shadow, but I did not.

The Gray Layer

I now considered myself part of the "gray layer." The gray layer means: those members of society who think only of "work and eat," or "consume and find." These two strata of society can be named the gray layer, because they are like animals who work only in order to eat and not die. And the third stratum, the people who hold responsibility toward society, have forgotten them too. In our society, Afghanistan, we see this reality with our own eyes. Totalitarian governments (governments of force) suffocate public minds as a whole and force everyone to follow and obey the leader of the regime like a shadow. All people think only of how to find and how to consume. The most refined among them are those who want to hear the day's news and show off their learning before others in gatherings, but they do not think of how to change society from its foundations. The gray layer means that all, or a great number, have given society to the winds of April, so that such human beings can be known as intelligent animals of "eat and find," for they have forgotten the gray layer, that is, the masses, and think only of how to get money, how to spend it, and what to learn in order to show off learning in society. Woe to such human beings as I, who am still a shadow.

An Autumn Night

It was one of the autumn nights. I was weeping, quite unintentionally, without any purpose; I wept only in memory of the death of my father and mother. While weeping I found myself slowly, very slowly; but this finding was momentary. I saw myself in a garden where it was only me with myself. My whole being and presence seemed abhorrent and repulsive to me. I hated myself and reproached myself, saying: Shame on you, unmanly man, seventy years of your life have passed, and you still live like a shadow in the bonds and cage of others…

But unfortunately all these pains were momentary and went away again. My feelings again became hostage to my mental egos. Once more I tried to come out in search of my true nature, and if possible to be myself. I do not know when I lost myself. Perhaps it was when, for the first time, I tried to be the way others expected me to be. Perhaps when I looked in the mirror and saw a face that was no longer familiar to me. What I know is that this loss happened quietly and without a sound; just like sinking into the darkness of a night that suddenly arrives.

My days were full of roles and responsibilities that gradually shaped my identity. I was a child, a friend, a husband, a father, an employee. Every role I took on took a particle of me, and in return showed me a new image of myself. But these images were pieces that never fully fit together.

For long years I sought for my life to have meaning and purpose. But in this outward search I forgot what was inside me. A moment came when I understood that my

real self, the self that was once acquainted with me, was lost amid all these roles and expectations.

Now I am on this journey; a journey toward myself, toward that lost self I must find again. This journey is a solitary one. I have neither a map nor a guide; I must only listen, look and feel. Perhaps this time, amid my doubts and mistakes, I will find something that helps me know myself again, and be saved from being a shadow!

My Lost Self

I am lost in myself, I am lost
sometimes in the being of this one
sometimes in the speech of that one
I search for myself, but no, no
I am lost
I am in pieces
my pieces are scattered into every nowhere
I am lost in the effort of being lost
I have lost my self
The mirrors of the city are all liars
No, no, my dear, I am not the one
whom the false mirror showed me
I am searching for myself, for my very self
You, stranger to my inside, go now
I sink into my very self
to find myself
to find myself

But this journey was not easy. I had to strive for years and years to separate my real self from the shadow I am. I am going to find myself, but within myself.

The real “I,” or what exists inside us, is often hidden from the eyes of others. This is what is known as the “lost self” or the “true self.” This “I” includes thoughts, feelings, values and identities that may not fully appear in our daily interactions. It is what we feel inside ourselves but do not necessarily show outwardly.

Finding the “real self” from within is a deep and valuable journey. For this, I must set aside the conditioned layers of the mind. Through practicing self-awareness and being an observer, unconditionally accepting my dark and light spots, and cutting off connection with outside judgments, I can listen to my inner voice and shape my authentic identity. This journey is so hard that I must enter myself with firm resolve and strong will, to see whose shadow I am and of what things. How can I distance those “whos” and “whats” from myself and be myself? On this path I also want to practice austerity at night.

I must observe these matters seriously and do separate work on myself. Although my real self is bitter in every way, and my friends do not accept me, it is not a problem; I hope to succeed.

Breaking this false fortress and being freed from the role of a follower requires courage. I am ready for change, and this is the most valuable step. When others do not accept my independence, it is a sign that my new, real identity endangers their interests or comfort.

To break this old structure and build the true self, I will take these practical steps:

Practice saying no. I start with very small things. Every time I do something for the sake of others' approval, I hide a piece of my true self.

Bearing the opposition of others. I must accept that my change will upset others. This discomfort is the price of my freedom and inner independence.

Identifying personal decisions.

Making personal decisions. Every day I will make at least one decision (even as small as choosing clothes or food) entirely on my own, according to my own personal wish.

Accepting responsibility for mistakes. A follower has no fear of error, because responsibility lies with someone else. To become independent, I will courageously accept responsibility for my choices and my mistakes.

The Paper Gods

But unfortunately, in the middle of the night, when everything had sunk into a heavy silence and I could hear only the sound of my own breathing, I fell into deep thought. I said to myself: from the beginning of my youth until today, how many gods have I bowed down before?

The more I thought, the more I realized that much of what I once considered sacred was nothing but mental idols and paper gods. One day position was my god, one day fame, one day the approval of the people, one day the party, one day ideology, one day ethnicity, one day religion, and one day the fear of other people's judgment.

Each time, in a new form, I had knelt before something and believed I had found the road to salvation, when I was only being moved from one prison to another.

Sometimes I had lived for a name, sometimes for a title, and at times for an image others had made of me. I had taken those images so seriously that I had buried my real self beneath a heap of them. The more I look back today, the more I see that my life was spent mostly in the service of these lifeless idols rather than on the road to knowing myself.

Many times I tried to break these false gods. I wanted to be freed from the bonds of fear. I wanted to be released from the captivity of people's definitions and praise. I wanted to be a slave no longer to names and labels. But each time I took a step forward, the shadow that had ruled my being for years pulled me back. It was as if invisible chains had been fastened to the hands and feet of my soul.

There I understood that breaking idols of stone is easier than breaking idols of the mind. A stone idol can be toppled with one blow, but an idol that has made its home in the mind resists for years. The idol of pride, the idol of fame, the idol of knowledge, the idol of self-righteousness and the idol of selfishness each have a thousand faces, and each time they appear in a new mask.

I wanted to be free, but I still lacked the courage for freedom. I wanted to be myself, but I still feared losing my masks. I wanted to see the truth, but for years I had grown used to the dark. That was why, with all my longing for liberation, I was still the same shadow that

breathed; a shadow that sometimes became aware of its prison but still lacked the strength to break down all its walls.

That night I stayed awake until dawn. There was no sleep in my eyes and no peace in my heart. Only one question kept repeating inside me: if one day all these names, titles, borrowed beliefs and fabricated images were taken from me, what would remain?

And I was afraid of the answer to that question; for I felt I still did not know my true self, and as long as a person does not know himself, however alive he may be among the people, in truth he is nothing but a shadow that breathes.

That night, the longer I stared into the darkness, the more I realized I had spent my life before idols that I myself had made. No one had forced me to bow before position, no one had compelled me to become captive to people’s praise, no one had put me in the bonds of fear and imitation; it was I who, with my own hands, had forged the chains and hung them around my own neck.

I thought to myself what a strange creature the human being is. For years he runs in search of freedom, yet remains heedless of the prison he has built inside himself. I was like that too. I complained of the prison of governments, I lamented the prison of poverty, I cried out against the prison of war and violence, but I never noticed that I carried the greatest prison in my own mind. A prison whose walls were built of fear, imitation, prejudice, selfishness and self-deception.

At that moment this question suddenly came alive in my mind: if the whole world forgets me, if no one speaks my name, if there is neither position nor reputation, will I still find any worth in living? For years I had searched for the answer to this question outside myself, but that night, for the first time, I felt the answer might lie within me.

Slowly I came to see that many of the wars human beings wage in the world are a reflection of the war they carry within themselves. A person who has not made peace with himself will not make peace with others. A person who does not know himself will seek to change others. And a person who is empty inside always tries to fill that emptiness with power, wealth, fame, creed or prejudice.

I too had done this for many years. Each time I put on a new garment and thought I had drawn near to the truth, but the truth remained far from me. Truth was not imprisoned in any party or group, could not be summed up in any name or title, and had no place in any slogan or banner. Truth was something that had to be discovered in the depths of the human being himself.

That night until dawn I spoke with myself. Nothing remained of politics and nothing of slogans. No trace of victories and none of defeats. Only I remained, and the shadow that had lived with me for years. A shadow that sometimes grew bigger than I, and sometimes covered my entire being. But for the first time I felt that perhaps one day I could come out from under its rule; perhaps one day I could see my real self, though I still had a long road ahead.

For I was still the same shadow that breathed; but at least I now knew that I was a shadow, and this knowing was the first step on the road to awakening.

Sometimes I think that perhaps the greatest deception of life is that a person plays a role for years and finally mistakes that role for his real self. I did the same. I lived in so many different roles that I forgot who the actor was.

One day I considered myself a revolutionary, one day a government employee, one day a refugee, one day the father of a family, one day a defeated man, and one day a person who wanted to flee his past. But amid all these names and titles, I rarely found the chance to ask myself: “Who is the one standing behind all these faces?”

Now, looking back, I see life as a long road whose greater part I have traveled in fog. People came and went. Governments rose and fell. Flags went up and came down. Slogans were shouted and then forgotten. But what remained was a question still alive in the depths of my soul: have I come to know myself?

Perhaps the answer to this question is still unclear. Perhaps it will not be fully clear until my last day. But at least today I know that the road to knowing oneself does not pass through the praise of others, nor through power, nor through wealth, nor through prejudice. This road passes through silence; through honesty with oneself; through accepting one’s faults and seeing the truth we have fled for years.

And I, the shadow that for years only breathed, am now slowly learning that perhaps one day I might live.

The Book and the Emperor

And just as I was drowned in these thoughts…

That same night I opened the book. I do not know what force drew me toward it, but it was as if fate wished to speak to me through another window. I turned its pages one after another until I came upon the life and thought of Marcus Aurelius, the great philosopher and emperor of Rome.

The more I read, the more I sank into myself. His words were simple, but they fell like a hammer on the old walls of my mind. He asked: What is justice? How should a person live? How can one remain human amid chaos and injustice?

Marcus said: *“Do not be unjust, even if you have the power to be. Be human, even if others have forgotten humanity. Know your inner self, and do not become a slave to the empty opinions of the people.”*

As I read these lines, tears welled in my eyes. I felt as if a man from two thousand years ago were speaking to me; to me, who all my life had wandered among slogans, fears, imitations and various roles.

From Marcus I went on to the other Stoic philosophers; to Socrates, to Epictetus, and to those who believed that a person becomes free when he governs himself. They said that happiness must not be tied to things that are not in our control; not to power, not to wealth, not to the praise of people, and not to the accidents of fortune. For everything outside us comes one day and goes another.

But I looked at my life with regret. I had spent most of my years on things beyond my control. Sometimes I had been captive to politics, sometimes to creed, sometimes to fear, and sometimes to the image others had made of me. I had been searching for freedom, but in truth I was a slave to thousands of invisible chains.

That night I closed the book and opened it again many times. I wept and reproached myself. I said: if I had read these words in my youth, would I still have walked the same roads? Would I still have spent so many years serving shadows?

But I had no clear answer.

The only thing I knew was that something inside me was slowly waking up. It was as if the old chains of the mind were gradually beginning to crack. I was not yet free, I still had a long road ahead, but for the first time I felt that perhaps freedom begins from within, not from without.

Marcus Aurelius wrote that the greatest ruler is not the one who governs lands; the greatest ruler is the one who governs his own self. One who can restrain anger, greed, fear, pride and self-deception is stronger than any empire.

These words stood before me like a mirror. In that mirror I did not see a free human being but a shadow that had breathed for years while living very little. A shadow that sometimes thought itself victorious and sometimes defeated, but in both states remained far from knowing itself.

Even so, that night a crack of hope opened in my heart. For the first time I felt that perhaps it was not yet too late. Perhaps a man who has lived seventy years in the shadow can still find a road toward the light. Perhaps part of the remaining years can still be spent in knowing that “true self” which has stayed hidden for so long beneath a heap of names, beliefs, fears and roles.

But the truth was that I still stood in the middle of the road; not wholly captive to the past, nor wholly free of it. I was still the same shadow that breathed, but now I could hear, from far away, the footsteps of the true self.

Today, looking back, I complain less about others and ask myself more. There was a time I thought the cause of all misfortune lay outside me: in governments, in leaders, in wars and in the accidents of fortune. But now I understand that part of the darkness had made its home inside me too.

For years I followed people who themselves did not know the way. For years I repeated words that had not risen from the depths of my soul. For years I fought for things whose truth I did not know. And perhaps my greatest mistake was that I rarely found time to sit in silence and ask myself: “O man, who are you?”

Now those hasty answers no longer satisfy me. Neither name is my answer, nor position, nor ethnicity, nor creed, nor past. Behind all of these stands a human being who had been lost for years in the clamor of life.

Perhaps this whole long journey, all this suffering and all these defeats, were only so that one day I might arrive at

this point; the point where, for the first time, instead of seeking to know the world, I set out to know myself.

The Distance Between Myself and Myself

And what a difficult journey it is, the journey inward.

I have become one of those travelers who lived for years in the shadow and now want to begin this hard inner journey; a journey not toward distant cities and lands, but toward the most lost place in the universe: the “true self” of a human being.

For many years I ran outside myself in search of success. One day I wanted to be a scholar, one day a teacher, one day a director, one day a farmer, and one day a person of rank and reputation. My life passed in changing roles, but today, looking back, I see that none of those roles was me. They were all garments that I put on and, after a while, set aside. What stayed constant in all those years was the same shadow hidden behind all these faces.

Every day I chose a new name for myself, but I never dared to ask: “Who is the one who carries these names on his shoulders?”

All my effort was to become something; but I never asked what I am now.

I was concerned with how others saw me. I wanted to look great in people’s eyes, be respected, be praised, and hear my worth from the tongues of others. But the more I went in search of others’ approval, the farther I moved from my real self. It was as if a high wall of expectations,

fabricated desires, fears and mental images had been raised between me and myself.

Today I understand that degrees, titles, position, fame and even the admiration of people cannot fill the place left empty by knowing oneself. For a person may be successful outside yet defeated within; thousands may know him, yet he himself may be unable to know himself.

I too was like that for years.

Many mental egos lived inside me; one thirsty for power, another for fame, one running after superiority over others and another fearing people's judgment. These various selves were constantly at war with one another, and I imagined that the sum of these voices was my real self.

But now, slowly, I realize that those voices are not me. They are only guests of the mind; shadows that have fallen for years on the wall of my soul.

The true self is perhaps far quieter than to be seen. Perhaps it has never shouted. Perhaps for years it has sat silently in a corner, waiting for the clamor of these false selves to die down.

My greatest sorrow is that between what I showed outwardly and what I was inwardly, there was an enormous distance. I wanted to be a humble person, but pride was hidden within me. I wanted to be free, but I was captive to the gaze of others. I wanted to seek the truth, but I mostly went after approval. I wanted to be myself, but all my life I played a role.

Yes, the distance between me and myself was greater than the distance from earth to heaven.

Today, looking back, I see that for long years I was searching for something that was always present inside me. Like a thirsty man sitting beside a spring but searching the deserts for water.

Now I no longer want to be somebody; I want to know myself.

I do not want to triumph over others; I want to overcome my fears, illusions and inner dependencies.

I do not want to be a shadow that only breathes; I want to be a human being who lives consciously.

The road is still long and I still stand at the beginning of this journey. Many chains are still fastened to the hands and feet of my soul. Sometimes I still return to those same old images and those same mental egos. But at least today I know that I had lost the way, and this knowing may be the first step of liberation.

For a person is born from the moment he dares to distinguish between “what is” and “what he imagines is.”

And I, that shadow that for years only breathed, now for the first time want to learn how to live.

At the Tomb of Mawlana

Last year, together with my wife Balqis Shafaq, I made a journey I had long cherished in my heart: a pilgrimage to the tomb of Hazrat Mawlana Jalaluddin Muhammad

Balkhi Rumi, that great man of love, knowledge and awareness.

From the moment I entered the grounds of the shrine, a strange feeling filled my whole being. Thousands of people had come from every corner of the world, each with a different language, culture and belief, but all in search of something whose name they themselves perhaps did not know. Some wept quietly, some murmured prayers, some had their hands on their hearts, and a group were so lost in the atmosphere of the shrine that they seemed suspended between earth and sky.

But in that crowd I saw scenes that plunged me into deep thought. I saw people throwing themselves on the ground, rolling in the dust, kissing the walls and the tomb, and behaving as if Mawlana himself were present there and could change their destiny. Some were so enraptured and intoxicated that no boundary seemed left between reverence and worship.

I too, who was still the same “shadow that breathed,” was not spared these collective feelings. The press of the crowd carried me along. For a moment I was so affected by the atmosphere that I almost threw myself to the ground, rubbed my hands on the earth and sought blessing from its dust. In that moment I felt that perhaps the road to salvation and peace lay in doing just that.

But when I came out of the crowded space of the shrine and stood a little while in a quiet corner, an inner event happened to me; an event that could not be seen with the eye or heard with the ear, but echoed in the depths of my soul.

It was as if a voice from the depths of history, from beyond the centuries, was speaking to me.

In my imagination I heard Mawlana say:

> *O man! Why do you search for me in the dust? I too was once a human being like you. These bones and this earth are not Mawlana.*
>
> *What remains of me is neither these stones nor these buildings. If you seek me, seek me in awareness; seek me in love; seek me in knowing yourself.*
>
> *For years this body has lain at rest in the heart of the earth. Nothing remains of that body that could save anyone. If you want to find me, come out of being a shadow. Wake from the sleep of imitation. Become a living, aware, feeling human being. Then you will taste the pleasure of the soul.*

These imagined, or perhaps inspired, words affected my being so deeply that for some moments I forgot everything. I felt that for years I had been running outside myself after the truth, while the truth had been sitting inside me, waiting.

All my life I had followed people, positions, creeds, groups, names and even sacred things; but I had never dared to journey into my own interior. It was as if I had always been searching for a lamp while the lamp burned in my own house.

On that day I understood that Mawlana never invited people to worship him. He calls the human being to

break idols; even the idols that are built in the human mind. The idol of fame, the idol of position, the idol of prejudice, the idol of ethnicity, the idol of selfishness, and even the idol of personalities.

Perhaps the greatest message of Mawlana is that a person must pass beyond everything that puts distance between him and the truth.

To tell the truth, on that day I became slightly intoxicated; not with wine, but with thought. I felt the old walls of my mind slowly beginning to crack. Had it not been for the companionship and care of my wife Balqis Shafaq, I might have stayed in that state for hours.

But with all these experiences, I still cannot claim to have found myself. I still have a long road ahead. Many chains of the mind are still fastened to the hands and feet of my soul. Sometimes I still return to the same old habits, the same fears and the same fabricated images.

Yes, I am still the same shadow that breathes; but the difference between today and yesterday is that now I know I am a shadow, and perhaps this awareness is the first step toward reaching the light.

Why Does a Person Chase the World in Youth and Search for Himself in Old Age?

For a long time I wondered why most people spend their youth in the pursuit of fame, position, wealth, power and thousands of other material desires, yet when they reach

the years of old age, they suddenly think of knowing themselves and want to journey inward.

I was no exception to this rule.

The years of my youth were spent among ambitions, rivalries, fears and endless wants. I thought that if I reached such-and-such a position I would be happy; if I gained such-and-such wealth I would find peace; if people respected me I would feel worthy. My days and nights were spent chasing these mirages.

But now, looking back, I see that most of what I ran after was not the need of my soul but the desire of my mind.

Youth is the season of expansion in the outer world. In that period a person has abundant energy. His blood is warm, his ambitions are great, and he still has enough time to test the world. For this reason, his gaze is mostly turned outward. He wants to acquire something, get somewhere, become someone and leave a mark.

But the outer world has a strange quality; the more you ask of it, the thirstier it keeps you.

A person reaches one desire and a greater desire appears before him. He attains one position and seeks another. He gains wealth and wants more wealth. It is a thirst that is not quenched by the water of the world.

It takes years for many of us to understand that we were searching for something that lay somewhere else.

When a person reaches the second half of life, the curtains slowly draw back. Physical strength declines, friends leave one after another, loved ones grow old or pass away, and he himself feels the shadow of death

drawing nearer. In such moments a great question suddenly wakes inside him:

“Who was I?”

This question is seldom heard in youth, because the clamor of life drowns it out. But in the years of old age, when the noise outside subsides a little, a person hears the voice within himself more clearly.

Perhaps this is why many people, in the final years of life, turn to mysticism, philosophy, spirituality and self-knowledge. Not because the truth has newly come into being, but because they have newly found the chance to hear it.

Today, when I think of my life, I see that I spent a large part of it building an image of myself; an image for others to see and admire. But I paid little attention to the human being who lived behind that image.

For years I labored to build a house in the outer world, but I neglected to make my inner house flourish.

Now I understand that fame, position and wealth are not bad in themselves. The problem arises when a person thinks his identity is summed up in these things. When that happens, he slowly drifts away from himself and turns into a shadow of himself.

Perhaps the secret of this matter is that youth is the time for gathering experience and old age is the time for understanding the meaning of those experiences.

In youth a person knows the world, but in old age, if he is fortunate, he knows himself.

And perhaps knowing oneself is harder than conquering a thousand cities.

Today, looking at the seventy years of my life, I sometimes ask myself with regret: if I had known in youth what I know today, would I have chosen another path?

I do not know the answer to this question.

But one thing I do know: it is not yet too late. As long as a person breathes, the road back to himself is not closed.

Perhaps I am still the same shadow that breathes, but now at least I know what I am searching for. I no longer seek to become someone; I want to find the one I have always been.

And perhaps this is the true beginning of life, even if it happens in the final chapters of a lifetime.

This book is not a story of victory; it is a story of endurance. The story of a human being who has passed through countless pains, hardships, defeats and transformations, and who, in whatever color the times have dressed him, has still not lost the essence of his own being. *The Shadow That Breathes* is the tale of a human being’s search for himself amid the darkness; where at times everything collapses, yet a hidden flame deep in the soul does not go out.

This work is an invitation to reflect on suffering, hope, self-knowledge and the meaning of being; a reminder that sometimes the greatest courage is to go on. To breathe, to rise, and to begin again.

And perhaps, after all these becomings and changes of color, a person finally returns to himself and discovers that in the depths of his being he is still the same shadow that breathes; as I myself, personally, still am.

This is not the story of one individual alone, but of many human beings; people who for years ran after name, bread, position, creed, party, ethnicity, fame or even external sanctities, and at the end of the road suddenly asked themselves:

“So where was I, myself?”

Perhaps one of the most beautiful truths of life is that a person, however late, one day notices the distance between his “image of himself” and his “truth.” Some never see this distance and leave the world with the same shadow; but others, even at seventy or eighty, find the courage to look inside themselves. This courage is itself a kind of awakening.

In my view, what is most valuable is an honest confession of one’s wanderings and errors. A person who considers himself complete learns nothing more; but a person who still asks himself, “Who was I, and what have I become?” is truly still alive and still growing.

I believe that *The Shadow That Breathes*, in its deepest layer, is not a story of wars, migrations, governments and political events; it is the story of a human being who, after a lifetime, wants to step out of the shadow and for the first time face his real self.

Changing Colors

Amid this fading and taking on of colors, one of the bitterest experiences of my life came when the Soviet Red Army entered my homeland. Looking back today, I see that instead of asking myself why these foreigners had come to my land and what fate their presence would write for our people, all my effort was to take on their color. It was as if from that time I had learned, instead of finding myself, to hide in the shadow of others.

I learned a few Russian words: greeting, asking after someone's health, and a few other simple phrases. That much was enough for me to feel I had grown close to them. For years I tried to resemble them in my gaze, my speech, even in my way of thinking. But this artificial coloring did not last. The Russians left and I remained, with an identity that was neither Russian nor my own.

Soon afterward, fate drove me into migration and brought me to Peshawar, Pakistan. There the same story repeated. My language changed, my way of dressing changed, my words changed, and even many of my habits and behaviors took on another color. I tried so hard to appear close to the people of that land that it was as if I had grown up for years in those same lanes and bazaars. I took refuge in the shadow of the khans of Peshawar and the notables of the locality, and especially when facing the strict police of that country, my whole effort was to be known less as a refugee.

But again this new color did not last. Times turned, and this time the Americans came to Afghanistan. Suddenly the Russian words fled my mind and gave way to English

ones. For years I tried to learn English and bring myself closer to Western culture and way of life. Though I never mastered English the way I wished, I did not fall short in becoming the shadow of the Americans. Again I wanted to be someone else; again I wanted to see myself in another's mirror.

And again years passed. That shadow, too, lost its color, and at last fate brought me to the land of the Netherlands. In the first years of my stay in that country I was so eager to be accepted that at times I distanced myself from my own identity. With broken, faltering Dutch I made up stories for the people there, and half joking, half serious, I said that our forefathers and theirs had once been brothers. That was how much I wanted to make myself appear close to them.

Today, looking back, I see that in all these years one thing stayed constant: myself. But alas, I had never come to know that very "self." The Russians left, Peshawar remained and passed, the Americans came and went, and I reached the Netherlands; but at every stage I only changed color. Like water, which takes the shape of whatever vessel it is poured into. I too took the shape of my surroundings, without asking where my own original vessel was.

Perhaps the greatest pain of my life is that I lived seventy years in various garments but rarely found a chance to know the true garment of my soul. Sometimes I was Russian, sometimes a Peshawari, sometimes enamored of the West and sometimes attached to other cultures; but I could rarely be myself. That is why even today, when I look back, I see myself as that "shadow that breathed"; a

shadow that kept changing color but was still wandering in search of its real face.

One of the very bitter, ugly and unforgettable memories was this: during the time of the Americans' presence, women of my country also worked in good and high positions, and alongside the government jobs given to women through the Americans, some of them had another, secret occupation ("merchants of girls and pretty women"). I saw these women from close by. Sometimes my conscience, or my lack of one, asked why they had taken up such trade, so much so that this shadow, that is, I, almost became a merchant as well. But fortunately I did not succeed in this, and the reason was not that I had been freed from being a shadow; no, it was only that I did not know how to run this unholy trade. In any case, I entered the Kingdom of the Netherlands in that same form of shadow, and here I was accepted as a refugee under the name "Basir Shafaq," not under the name "shadow." Until one day, on one of the days of Eid, I went to a mosque to perform the Eid prayer.

The Kissed Hands

That day, after performing the Eid prayer, I was standing among a large crowd of people. The atmosphere of Eid was full of congratulations and handshakes, and everyone went toward another to pay his respects. But I, who had lived for years in the bonds of imitation and following, again did my usual thing. Whoever kissed someone's hand, I too hurriedly repeated the same, without thinking whose hand it was and what record its owner had in life.

Among them were people whom others respected out of fear or expediency; some of whom had wallowed for years in blood and violence, and others who had spent their lives in profiteering and deceiving the people. But I, like a will-less shadow, kissed everyone's hands. Not out of belief, but out of habit; a habit that had taken root in me for years.

Little by little the whispers began. Some smiled, some pointed secretly at one another, and some openly mocked me. Those mockeries fell on my heart like a dagger. I felt my face burning with shame and drops of sweat sliding down my forehead. The sound of laughter echoed in my ears and the ground under my feet grew heavy.

Suddenly I felt so faint that I could no longer stand. The world blurred before my eyes and I fell to the ground. But what others took for weakness and dizziness was in truth the beginning of a silent revolution inside me.

At that very moment, it was as if a door opened in the depths of my being. A voice rose from the bottom of my soul; a voice that had stayed silent for years, buried under a heap of fears, imitations and mental egos. With calm but with power, it said:

> *"Forgive me, dear friends! I never wanted to be the hand-kisser of every unworthy man and every pretender. For years I did this out of fear and habit, not out of knowledge and belief."*

I felt that another person had risen from within me; someone very like me, yet at the same time different from me. He was neither afraid nor in need of others'

approval. He stood before everyone and said in a ringing voice:

> *“Right now I have awakened from the sleep of being a shadow.”*

That moment was strange and indescribable for me. It was as if I had been walking for years in the dark and suddenly a crack of light shone into my interior. For the first time I asked myself: why should I seek my worth in the approval of others? Why should I sacrifice my personality to be accepted? Why should I bow my head before every holder of power?

I, who for years had lost myself, in that very moment recovered something of myself. Not that I suddenly became a complete human being; no. But for the first time I could feel a difference between the “real self” and the “shadow.”

When I rose from the ground, the people were the same people and the world the same world. But something inside me had changed. It was as if an old corpse of habits and imitations had collapsed within me, and from among those ruins a new human being was rising.

Perhaps I still had a long road ahead to complete liberation, but that day I understood that the greatest victory of a human being is not overcoming others; it is overcoming his own fears and dependencies. That day I knew I had been a shadow for years, but for the first time I felt a spark of being human inside me.

I had only just understood that: *“For seventy years I sought the world, but the world did not bring me to myself. Now that I have found a little of myself, I only*

now understand that the hardest journey is not from one city to another; it is the journey from shadow to human being. For years I traveled from Kabul to Peshawar, from Peshawar to Europe, and from one country to another, but no journey was as hard as the few steps I took from falsehood toward truth."

Nationalism and Social Challenges in Afghanistan: A Reflection from the Shadow That Breathes

Yes, I had only just realized that human beings are not such complicated creatures; but sometimes they become so caught in the trap of selfishness, prejudice and a sense of superiority that they drift away from their human truth. For years I too was like that; for years I lived among shadows and took many beliefs I had received from others for absolute truth. But when I faced myself a little, I understood that many of the wars, enmities and hatreds that have ruined human lives have sprung from this very sense of superiority.

Some people think that because of their ethnicity, language, race, religion or geographic region they are superior to others. Though this idea may on the surface take on the color of identity and pride, in truth it is one of the most dangerous intellectual errors of humankind. People may differ from one another in language, culture, custom or circumstances of life, but none of these differences is proof of the inherent superiority of one human being over another.

From a moral and human viewpoint, the worth of each person is measured by his conduct, thought, honesty and service to others, not by the name of the ethnic group written on his identity card or the language he speaks. A society built on ethnic and linguistic supremacy will sooner or later become a field of conflict and mistrust.

When I had come a little out of the prison of being a shadow and faced the reality of my own existence, I felt that things had piled up inside me that had to be written. For this reason I wrote an article and sent it to one of the newspapers of my homeland. That article was published, but for me, who had lived in silence for years, it created plenty of trouble. For many of those who profited from ethnic and linguistic prejudice did not like my words.

In that article I had written that Afghanistan, despite its turbulent history and wide ethnic and cultural diversity, can reach peace and progress when its citizens see one another, before anything else, as “human beings.” A country whose children, instead of cooperating, seek to prove their ethnic and linguistic superiority will waste a large part of its strength in pointless quarrels.

Ethnic and cultural diversity is neither a threat nor a weakness; it is a great asset. Just as a beautiful garden is not made of only one kind of flower, a nation too does not flourish with the presence of only one ethnic group, one language or one culture. The beauty of Afghanistan lies in this very variety.

On the other hand, development and progress are not achieved with slogans alone. A society in which there is no social justice, equality of opportunity and universal access to education will never reach true flourishing.

Education, awareness and mutual respect are the most important tools against prejudice and hatred.

Today's world is thinking of conquering space, of artificial intelligence and of astonishing technologies; yet we are still caught up in questions that should have been settled centuries ago. We still quarrel with one another over ethnicity, language, region and religion, as if we had forgotten that we are all inhabitants of one land and members of one human family.

In this, the role of the women and girls of Afghanistan is of special importance. No society can achieve real progress with half of its abilities. Closing the doors of education and schooling to girls is not only depriving a few million human beings of their natural right; it is depriving a nation of a large part of its intellectual, cultural and economic capacity.

I, who was a shadow for years, have come today to the belief that the greatest enemy of a human being is sometimes not the foreigner but the very prejudices and illusions he nurtures inside himself. If one day we can see the human being beyond ethnicity, language, religion and region, perhaps on that day we will have taken the first real step toward freedom.

And I, the shadow that breathed for years, had just understood that freedom, before it is won outside, must be born inside the human being.

No Lineage or Language Is Superior to Another

I, who after seventy years of wandering felt as though newly born, placing my first steps of awareness on the unknown ground of self-knowledge, looked at my surroundings with wonder. The world was the same world, the people were the same people, but my gaze was no longer the gaze of the past.

Before that, for long years I had lived in the prison of inherited and imitated beliefs. Whatever I had heard I accepted, and whatever others had said I repeated without thinking. But now that I had woken a little from my shadow-like sleep, many things I once considered self-evident had become questions for me.

One of these questions was the matter of ethnic, linguistic and lineage-based superiority.

Every day I saw one group taking pride in its language and another in its lineage. Some considered themselves superior to others only because they had been born into a particular family, a particular tribe or a particular region. For me, who had just awakened from my seventy-year sleep, this was painful and distressing.

I thought to myself: has the child who opens his eyes on the world today in some corner of the globe chosen which language to speak or into which ethnic group and lineage to be born?

The answer was clear: never.

So how can something that was not the human being's choice become the measure of his greatness or smallness?

Throughout history, various languages and lineages have grown like branches of one great human tree. Each carries its own culture, memory, music, literature, legends and experiences. Every language is a window onto the world; a window that looks at existence from a different angle.

Language is only a means of conveying thought, just as a river is a means of conveying water. Can one say that the water passing through one river is worth more than the water flowing in another?

Languages are the same. Each is a vessel for human thought, feeling and experience. No language is inherently superior to another. Some languages may have more vocabulary in science, literature or technology, and others may have found greater richness in poetry, music and folk culture; but these differences are not proof of superiority; they are signs of the diversity and richness of human civilization.

The same truth holds for lineages.

No people is born more virtuous than another. What makes a person great is his conduct, not his blood; his thought, not the name of his tribe; his ethics, not the color of his skin.

I, who had been a shadow for years, was now slowly realizing that many of history's wars, hatreds and enmities have sprung from this very illusion of superiority. Instead of taking pride in their moral virtues,

people take pride in things they played no part in acquiring.

If someone loves his mother tongue, that is beautiful; but if that same love ends in contempt for the languages of others, it is no longer love but blind pride.

If someone loves his culture and lineage, that too is commendable; but if that love turns into hatred of others, he has left the road of humanity.

Now, looking back from behind the window of seventy years of life, I see that people are more victims of their own illusions than of others. Each has built for himself a fence of names, colors, ethnicities and beliefs, and then become imprisoned in that very fence.

But the truth is much simpler than we imagine:

We are all short-term travelers on one planet; with hearts that beat in one way, with tears that taste the same, and with a death that knows no difference between languages and lineages.

And I, who in my seventieth year had only just tasted another birth, was slowly learning that the worth of a human being lies neither in his lineage, nor in his language, nor in his name; but in the measure of his being human.

Perhaps that was why, the more I came to know my true self, the less I believed in imaginary superiorities, and the more I understood that for long years I had lived like a shadow; a shadow that breathed but had not yet learned the meaning of being human.

The Second Birth

Seeing and understanding such atmospheres and truths, I, who had slowly stepped into the realm of true life, blamed others less and put myself on trial more. The more the curtains drew back from before my eyes, the more I understood that I had been the greatest dupe of my own life.

I said to myself: How is it possible for a person to live seventy years and still not know himself? How is it possible to bow his head all his life before people who were neither worthy of bowing to nor deserving of praise? How is it possible to kiss, for years, the hands of people who themselves were captive to pride, prejudice, selfishness and the lust for superiority?

These questions went into my soul like a dagger.

The day these thoughts fell with all their weight on my spirit, I could no longer restrain myself. I was sitting in a corner thinking about the road I had come. Memories of distant years passed before my eyes one after another; years in which I thought I was living but was in truth only playing a role.

Tears streamed involuntarily from my eyes. Drops of tears fell on my hands and lap and I had no power to stop them. A heavy lump pressed on my throat; the lump of seventy years of negligence, seventy years of imitation and seventy years of being a shadow.

In that state my wife saw me. She came near with concern and asked:

“What is the matter? Why are you so distraught? What has hurt you?”

I wanted to speak, but the words broke in my throat. Only tears answered. It took a while before I could collect myself.

At last, in a trembling voice, I said:

“I am not hurt by anyone; I am hurt by myself. By a life that passed and in which I was not myself. I am sorrowful that until today I was a shadow, and only now do I feel that I have stepped into real life. It is as if the human being I was meant to be has only now, in this seventieth year, been born.”

My wife was silent for a while. In her eyes I saw sorrow and tenderness together. Then she put her hand on my shoulder and said:

“Do not reproach yourself so much. Many people never experience this awakening. Many live with the same dreams and leave the world with the same dreams. You, at least, have woken.”

Later my children and other family members also learned of my state. Contrary to what I expected, no one blamed me. Everyone spoke with kindness and compassion.

One of them said:

“Dear father, do not be sad. There is still time. How many people stayed all their lives in the prison of false beliefs and never found the chance to see the truth. Your good fortune is

not that you were a shadow for seventy years;
your good fortune is that you have now
recognized being a shadow."

Those words settled like a balm on the wounds of my heart.

That night for the first time I felt that perhaps God gives birth to each human being twice; once when he is born of his mother, and a second time when he knows his own truth.

I had experienced the first birth seventy years before; but my second birth had only just begun.

And despite all the regrets and sorrows I had over the past, a spark of hope had been lit in the depths of my being; a hope that said it was still possible to walk the rest of the road consciously, still possible to come out of the shadow and step into the light of the true self.

Perhaps the past will never return, but the future has not yet been written.

"My Name Is Boromand"

But today, around ten in the morning, a small event happened that held great meaning for me.

A man whom I had known for years, and who himself was a follower of that same old world of prejudice, pride and superiority, called out to me from a distance:

"Hey!"

In the past, I would have answered at once. I might even have gone toward him with a smile and humility; for in those days I was still a shadow, and shadows, by whatever name they are called, raise no objection. They have grown used to others deciding for them, others choosing names for them and others setting their road.

But today something inside me had changed.

I stopped, looked into his eyes, and with a calm that surprised even me, said:

> *“My dear friend, my name is Boromand. Call me by my name. I am no longer that wandering shadow of the past.”*

The man was silent for a moment. It was as if he had not expected such an answer.

I went on:

> *“For many years I slept. For many years I lived with names, labels and images that others had made for me. But now I want to return to my origin. From this moment I want to step onto the road of truth.”*

Then, involuntarily, words flowed from my tongue that seemed to have been imprisoned in the depths of my being for years.

I said:

> *“For a long time I have been asking myself: what is the soul? What is it that makes me Boromand and you Shah Mohammad? If this soul is taken from us, what remains? Will we be*

anything but a silent, motionless body? Will we be anything but a handful of dust and bones that one day comes to rest in the heart of the earth?"

The man was still silent, and for the first time I felt that the true addressee of my words was not he, but myself.

I went on:

"If the truth of my being lies in this very soul, then why have I spent my whole life learning about other things and never set out in search of knowing it? Why have I learned the names of thousands of people, yet not known the true owner of my own existence?"

At that moment I felt a small door opening inside me.

Until that day I had had many friends; some stood beside me out of interest, some out of habit, and some out of fear. But now I had realized that my most precious friend was the one I had neglected for years: that living truth breathing in the depths of my being.

I vowed to myself that from now on I would keep company with that unknown friend more than with any other human being; with the soul whose voice I had not heard for years.

I decided that for the rest of my life, instead of running after fame, position, the praise of people and the approval of this one and that, I would go in search of knowing this great secret; a secret that had been present in me from the first day of my birth, and to which I had never found the time to say hello.

For others that day was perhaps an ordinary day; but for me it marked the start of a new journey.

A journey from false names toward the true name.

A journey from shadow toward light.

A journey from imitation toward knowing.

And most important of all, a journey from outside to inside.

And I said to myself: from this moment I give myself a name: *“Birth in Truth.”*

What Is the Soul?

That day, after my talk with that man, my mind would not rest for hours. A question, like a restless bird, flew in the sky of my thought:

> *“What is the soul?”*

The more I thought, the more I felt that I had spent my whole life learning about the outer world, yet had remained heedless of knowing the greatest secret within myself.

I looked around me.

I saw the trees dancing in the breeze.

I saw the birds that, without knowing any philosophy, cleft the sky.

I saw the river, which without speaking of its destination, followed its own course.

I said to myself: is something of that same secret hidden in all these beings too?

My body is of earth; the same earth to which I shall one day return. My bones are made of the materials of this very ground. My blood has come into being from water and food. But there is something in me that is neither earth, nor water, nor flesh and bone.

It is the very thing that laughs, weeps, loves, hates, desires and fears death.

It is the very thing that in the silence of the night asks me:

"Who are you?"

Suddenly I remembered dozens of people I had seen in the course of my life. Some were rich, some poor; some were commanders and some commanded; some were famous and some unknown.

But the moment the soul left their bodies, all became equal.

The corpse of a king and the corpse of a beggar in the street no longer differed.

A body without a soul neither commands nor obeys.

In that moment I thought that perhaps the whole worth of a human being also depends on this invisible secret.

Perhaps what we call "I" is neither this face nor this name; but that hidden truth that lives in the depths of our being.

But another question occupied my mind:

If the soul is so precious, why do we spend most of our lives serving the body?

Why do we give hours to clothes, houses, position and fame, yet do not pause even for a moment to know our own soul?

Perhaps this was why I stayed a shadow for seventy years.

I knew my body, but not my soul.

I knew my name, but not the owner of the name.

I looked in the mirror every day, but had never sat down to watch the one who looks into the mirror.

That night I stayed awake until late.

I felt that a window was slowly opening in my interior; a window that led to an unknown world.

I no longer wanted only to know what people said about me.

I wanted to know what that silent truth sitting in the depths of my being thought about me.

For the first time in my life I felt that perhaps all my life I had mistaken the destination for the road.

The body was the road; the soul the destination.

The shadow was the road; the truth the destination.

And only now, at seventy, had I taken the first step toward that destination.

And from now on I want to find answers to these important, great and valuable questions:

Who am I, really?

What is the soul?

Why does a person spend his life building images?

What is true freedom?

Can a Person Be Born Again After Seventy?

Who am I, really?

This question would not leave my mind for a long time. The more I looked into the mirror of my life, the more I asked myself: is it possible for a person, after seventy years of life, to be born again? After a lifetime of wandering, after years of being a shadow, can one suddenly open his eyes and find his real self?

Until only recently I thought birth happens only once; the day an infant steps into this world from his mother's womb. But now I am slowly realizing that perhaps a person's greatest birth takes place not on the first day of life, but on the day he comes to know himself.

For years I ran after names. At one time I considered myself a teacher, at another a director, a merchant, a refugee, an intellectual, a fighter, and at another a defeated man. But today I understand that none of these was "me." They were all garments put upon the body of the soul; garments that came and went, while the owner of the garments remained unknown.

In search of the answer to this question I turned to reading various works. In philosophy, mysticism and the

divine religions, I repeatedly met the truth that a human being is something beyond flesh and bone. What makes up the truth of a human being is his soul; that invisible essence which God breathed from the world of meaning into the body of clay.

Little by little I realized that a corpse without a soul is no longer a human being. The body is only a vehicle for the soul's temporary presence in this world. Just as a horse is a mount for riding, the body too is the mount of the soul. One day this mount wears out and falls, but the truth of the human being is something beyond this earthly frame.

This thought shook me.

I said to myself: if my truth is the soul, then why have I spent my whole life adorning the body, position, fame, wealth and mental images? Why have I fought for seventy years for the shadow and forgotten the owner of the shadow?

At that moment I felt I had lived for years in a house whose owner I had never seen.

The mystics say a person has two births: the birth of the body and the birth of the spirit. Many people experience the first birth but never reach the second. They come, eat, strive, amass wealth, grow old and go; without once having met their true self.

When I look at my past, I see that I too was like this for years. I was a shadow that breathed. I walked, spoke, laughed, wept, but did not live. It was as if someone else were living in my place and I was only the spectator.

But now, at seventy, a crack of light has opened inside me.

I do not say I have found myself completely. I still have a long road ahead. Many of the mental chains have not yet come off the hands and feet of my soul. Sometimes the old shadow still returns and wants to pull me back to the past. But the difference is that now I know it.

Now I know that I am not the shadow.

I am not the names.

I am not the positions.

I am not the defeats and victories.

I am that silent truth that was buried for years under the rubble of a thousand false “I”s.

Perhaps this is what being born again means; not that a person becomes young, but that he wakes.

Perhaps seventy is not the end of life; perhaps it is its true beginning.

And I, who for years thought of myself as a seventy-year-old man, feel today like a child who has only just opened his eyes on the world; a child who wants to take his first steps on the road of knowing the soul, knowing the truth and knowing himself.

Perhaps this is why I am no longer afraid of my hair turning white. What frightens me is not the aging of the body, but dying before the soul has awakened.

And now, after seventy years, for the first time I have dared to come out of the shadow and step toward the light.

“You Are All Thought”

> *O brother, you are entirely thought;*
> *the rest of you is bone and sinew.*

In this saying Mawlana does not wish to deny the worth of the body; he wishes to say that the truth of a human being lies in what flows within him; in his awareness, thought, knowledge, love and soul. Without this inner truth, the body is little more than bone and flesh.

If we connect this idea with my story, perhaps “Boromand,” the narrator of the novel, after seventy years had only now grasped the meaning of this saying:

That night when I read this verse of Mawlana, the book stayed open in my hands for a long time and my eyes kept circling the same two lines:

> *O brother, you are entirely thought;*
> *the rest of you is bone and sinew.*

I said to myself: if this saying is true, then which thought have I followed for seventy whole years?

Was my thought my own, or others’?

Was what set me in motion the truth of my being, or the fears, imitations, ambitions and images that others had planted in my mind?

Suddenly I felt Mawlana speaking to me across the centuries.

It was as if he said: *“O man of seventy! If your thought is captive, though you walk free, you are still a prisoner. And if your thought is freed, even in the narrowest prison you are free.”*

In that moment I understood that for years I had cared for my bones but handed my thought over to any passerby. Sometimes the thought of my ethnic group had ruled me, sometimes the thought of the party, sometimes the thought of wealth, sometimes the thought of fame, and at times the thought of fear.

I protected my body, but I had given my soul over to captivity.

Perhaps this is why I called myself “the shadow that breathes.”

For a shadow has a body but no light; it has movement but no will; it has presence but its truth springs from another.

Mawlana made me aware of this secret: a person becomes human when his thought wakes from sleep. Otherwise he may walk for a lifetime, speak, laugh, and even be respected by the people, yet still not have reached himself.

That night, for the first time, I asked myself:

> *“If I am all thought, then whose thought is my thought?”*

And this was a question that drew me onto a journey on which I am still stepping.

I set out to be absorbed in realizing this one verse, so that I might find myself exactly.

> *He who conquers a thousand cities is a hero;*
> *but he who conquers himself is free.*

My aim is a hundred percent freedom, not heroism.

I soon came to see that if a person wants to become free, he must become God's prey.

The First Fruit of Becoming God's Prey Is Freedom

My dear ones…

When a person draws near to his inner truth,

the first sign is freedom;

not outward freedom,

but freedom from:

groundless fears,

sick attachments,

mental worries,

and the prison of thoughts that rob peace.

In mysticism, "becoming God's prey" means being captured in love and awareness.

And strangely,

this captivity sets a person free.

For he is no longer the slave of his own agitated mind.

Boromand, too, in this direction spared no effort, and soon succeeded in joining the company of those mystics who have, at the very least, come to know themselves.

Distance From the House of God

Here is a beautiful interpretation:

“The house of God means the human heart.”

In the view of the mystics,

the aware heart

is the seat of light and truth.

But when a person moves away from this house,

and goes to the “house built by the mental ego,”

he slowly loses his freedom.

The mental ego

builds a house of:

comparison,

envy,

fear,

dependence,

and approval-seeking.

And the person,

without knowing it,

lives in this prison for years.

Now Boromand, as if after seventy years he had once again opened his eyes in the world of truth, was no longer the man of yesterday; the man who for years had lived under the rule of fears, imitations, selfishness and “mental egos.” He felt that the chains that had bound the hands and feet of his thought for a lifetime were slowly beginning to break. A long road to complete freedom still remained, but at least now he knew he was a prisoner, and this awareness was the first step to freedom.

One dawn, when the first light had not yet fully risen over the horizon, Boromand got up from sleep. He opened the window. The cool morning breeze blew on his face. He rubbed his half-open, dim eyes and for a moment looked at the sky. A deep silence had settled everywhere; a silence that seemed to hold a thousand unspoken words in its heart.

In that state he asked himself:

> *“Every day when people rise from sleep, they first think of their bodies. One thinks of bread, another of wealth, another seeks fame, another dreams of power, and a group spend hours working on the beauty of their figure and the strength of their body. All try to make the body fatter, prettier and stronger. But how many of them, before thinking of their body, ask themselves: What will I do for my soul today? How will I polish the mirror of my spirit today?”*

This question swirled in his mind like a wave and would not settle.

He said to himself:

> *"If we wash the body with water every day, with what do we wash the soul? If we exercise for hours to strengthen our muscles, what practice do we do to strengthen conscience, love, truthfulness and awareness? If the body grows weak from hunger, does the soul not also grow hungry and sick from ignorance, lies, arrogance and hatred?"*

The more he thought, the more he felt that today's human being, rather than thinking of building up his interior, spends all his energy decorating his exterior. He adorns the body but consigns the soul to oblivion; though this body will sooner or later return to dust, what continues its journey is the soul.

At that moment the words of the great mystics came alive in his mind. He remembered that many of them practiced austerity not to torment the body but to awaken the soul. They wanted to scrub away the rust of selfishness, greed, envy, pride and attachment from the mirror of the spirit so as to see the truth without a veil.

Boromand murmured in his heart:

> *"Now I understand a little why the mystics stressed so much the purification of the self. They were not enemies of the body; they were enemies of the captivity of the soul."*

A saying of Ibn Arabi came alive in my memory, whose meaning was this: as long as a person does not know the truth of his soul and does not nurture it, he still lives in the world of shadows. What we take for our truth is mostly images imposed on us by fear, habit, fame, power and the desires of the lower self.

For years I was that same shadow; a shadow that breathed, spoke, ran, feared and wished, yet still did not know itself.

Now I had come to see that a person's true birth is not the day he is born of his mother; it is the day he asks himself for the first time:

> *"Who am I? Am I this body? This name? This fame and position? Or is there a deeper truth within me that I have neglected for years?"*

Perhaps the answer to this question is not the end of the journey; but it is surely the beginning of a road that starts from the shadow and arrives at the light.

> *"For years I thought I was searching for God, truth and freedom; but in the end I discovered that God was not lost, nor was truth hidden; it was I who, beneath the shadow of a thousand false 'I's, had lost myself."*

The Walls and the House

Now Boromand had rightly understood that his real personality had never been destroyed; it had been buried under the heavy rubble of the "mental egos."

Neither had his innate nature vanished, nor had God moved away from him; only between him and the truth high walls of fear, imitation, selfishness, fame-seeking and fabricated images had risen. For long years he had thought those walls were his home, when they were his prison.

With much suffering he had managed to break part of the chains of the shadow, but he was honest with himself and knew that freedom is not an event; it is a journey. He still could not claim to be one hundred percent free of the prison of mental egos. Sometimes the shadow of yesterday, quietly and without a sound, rose from some corner and wanted to take the reins of his life again. The difference, however, was that this time Boromand knew the shadow and no longer fell easily for its deceit.

Some of his old friends, who for years had presented themselves as scholars, philosophers or intellectuals, were still unwilling to accept him as an independent person. They wanted the same obedient, silent Boromand of the past; the shadow who always bowed his head, gave approval, kissed hands and never asked a question.

Others, out of goodwill or habit, said to him:

> *“It is better that you stay quiet. Don’t oppose. Get along with the elders. Accept whatever they say. That’s life.”*

Boromand pondered these words for hours. He asked himself:

> *“Is the problem with me? Is this refusal to accept selfish, ambitious and arrogant people a sign of my own pride? Or a sign that I am only*

now beginning to see the truth? Have I too been caught by a new mental ego, or do I only want to be free?"

These questions were guests of his mind for many nights.

At last he arrived at a conclusion that settled a little peace in his heart. He understood that freedom differs from enmity.

A person can respect everyone yet be no one's slave. He can listen to what others say yet not hand over his reason and conscience for rent. He can love, yet not sacrifice his personality for the satisfaction of others.

Quietly he said to himself:

"For years I had mistaken respect for servitude. I thought that if I made myself small I would become a great human being; but today I understand that humility is not the same as abasement. Humility is born from knowing oneself, but abasement from forgetting oneself."

From that day on he decided not to trade his personality for any name, any position, any wealth or any fame. If someone spoke the truth, he accepted his words with heart and soul; but if someone expected only bowing and obedience, Boromand would pass by him in peace.

He no longer wanted to be anyone's enemy; but more than that, he did not want to be his own enemy.

In his heart he murmured:

> *“For years I was a shadow; the shadow of my father, the shadow of my teacher, the shadow of politics, the shadow of ethnicity, the shadow of religion, the shadow of power, and even the shadow of my own fears. But now, if I am to be only one person in this world, I want to be the one God created, not the one people want me to be.”*

And at that moment he felt that he still had a long road ahead, but this time he would walk it on his own feet, not with the steps of a shadow.

At last I, Boromand, said to myself and decided:

> *“Freedom from the shadow does not mean enmity with people; it means peace with oneself.”*

Does God Exist?

I too, who was stepping along the road of passing beyond the shadow and reaching my origin, one day met with an event that did not leave my mind for a long time.

In a small gathering, two old friends, Wais-ud-Din and Hamidullah, were engaged in a heated conversation. Their debate was neither about money and position nor about politics; it was about the greatest question in human history: does God exist or not?

Wais-ud-Din was a believing man, a man of the heart. He said with assurance:

> *“If you do not find God in the outer world, you will find Him within yourself. God is nearer to a person than his jugular vein. If a person knows himself, he will know his Lord too.”*

Opposite him stood Hamidullah, a man who considered himself irreligious and a follower of materialist thought. He smiled and said…

> *“All of these are made by the human mind. There is no God. Nature has its own law; we have emerged from the heart of nature, and one day we return to the embrace of that same nature. What exists is matter, and nothing more.”*

Their debate grew hotter by the moment. Each tried to convince the other, but neither was willing to retreat even a step from his belief.

Suddenly both turned their eyes toward me.

Wais-ud-Din said:

> *“Boromand! You tell us. Who is right?”*

I, who was still not entirely free of the bonds of shadows, instead of expressing the truth within me, out of long habit wanted to keep both of them satisfied.

First I turned to Wais-ud-Din and said:

> *“You are right. God is always with the human being, nearer to him than the jugular vein. Whoever journeys within himself will find His signs.”*

Wais-ud-Din’s face bloomed with joy, as if he had found a new comrade-in-arms.

But my words were not yet finished when Hamidullah, with a smile mixed with doubt, said:

> *“If that is so, can you prove it?”*

Again that old shadow woke inside me; the same shadow that was always afraid someone might be displeased with it.

Without thinking of what I had said a few moments before, this time I turned to Hamidullah and said:

> *“In truth, perhaps you are right. Perhaps there is no God. Perhaps everything is a product of nature and the human being too will one day return to dust.”*

A heavy silence fell over the room.

Wais-ud-Din looked at me in disbelief, and Hamidullah smiled with a look mixed with mockery.

A few moments later, both laughed; but their laughter was more painful than any reproach.

That day I understood that they were not mocking me; rather,

they were seeing the shadow inside me.

For the first time I felt that for years I had spoken not with the language of the heart but with the language of fear. Wherever I had seen a believer, I had become a believer; wherever I had seen a denier, a denier. It was as if I had neither a thought nor the courage to express

it; I was only a mirror reflecting whatever image stood before it.

On the way back I asked myself again and again:

> *“Boromand! If you were alone today, with no one to see or judge you, what would your answer have been? Do you truly believe? Do you truly deny? Or have you not yet even come to know yourself?”*

That question fell on my head like a hammer.

In that moment I understood that the greatest catastrophe is not failing to know the answer;

the greatest catastrophe is for a person, out of fear of others, to hide his answer.

That day I decided never again to voice any belief merely to win others’ approval. If one day I reach a truth, I will say it in peace; and if I still do not know, I will say with courage: *“I do not know.”*

For an honest “I do not know” is a thousand times more valuable than a false certainty born only of fear or imitation.

For others, that incident was perhaps a simple conversation; but for me it was another step on the road out of the shadow. I understood that as long as a person lacks the courage to speak with the true voice of his own soul, he has not yet become free, though he may think he has lived free for years.

Final Chapter

The Day the Shadow Died

That night Boromand had neither a book in his hand nor a pen. For years, whenever his heart broke, he had taken refuge in writing; but this time he felt that even words must fall silent. Some truths cannot be written; they must be lived.

He opened the window.

A gentle breeze passed through the branches of the trees and settled on his face. The sky was full of stars, but his gaze was fixed not on the sky but on his own interior. Seventy years of life passed before his eyes like a caravan.

He saw a child who wanted others to love him.

He saw a young man who ran for fame.

He saw a man who changed color many times for position, wealth, creed, party, ethnicity, language and a thousand other names.

He saw a refugee who, to stay alive, changed his clothes, his language, even his face.

He saw a man who kissed hands that did not deserve respect.

And he saw a human being who, for years, out of fear of people's judgment, hid the truth of his heart.

A tear slid quietly down his cheek.

But this time it was not a tear of defeat; it was a tear of recognition.

He said to himself:

> *"Boromand! You were never a bad person; you were simply not yourself."*

That sentence shone like a light in the darkness of his soul.

He laid his head on the pillow.

That night he had a dream the likes of which he had never seen.

He found himself in a boundless plain, one with neither beginning nor end. Thousands of shadows wandered in it. Each shadow was a face from his past. One wore the garb of a director,

another the garb of a soldier,

one was a refugee,

another an intellectual,

one rich,

another poor,

one a believer,

another a denier.

All said with one voice:

“We are you.”

Boromand was silent for a moment.

Then, with a calm he had never tasted in his life, he answered:

“No.

You were roads I passed through.

You were garments I wore.

You were names people gave me.

But none of you was me.”

Suddenly a breeze began to blow.

The shadows vanished one by one into the light; not with war, not with a cry, but with recognition.

In that silence a voice rose from the depths of his being; a voice that was neither man nor woman, neither old nor young.

The voice said:

“Now say your name.”

Boromand answered:

“I am Boromand.”

The voice asked again:

“Apart from this, what are you?”

Boromand smiled.

“Nothing.

Neither my position,

nor my wealth,

nor my ethnicity,

nor my language,

nor my fame,

nor my defeats,

nor my victories.

I am that same soul that God once breathed into this body, and that I had lost for years in the dust of the mental egos."

At that moment he woke from sleep.

Dawn had risen behind the window.

For the first time, he felt that the morning air smelled of freedom.

He rose quietly.

He set the mirror before him.

For years he had seen only his face in the mirror; but that day, for the first time, he felt he was seeing a human being who was no longer afraid of himself.

A few hours later, one of his old friends came to visit him.

With surprise he said:

"Boromand! You have changed so much these days. What is the secret of this calm?"

Boromand was silent for a little while.

He looked at the small garden of the house, where flowers had bloomed without any pretension.

Then he said:

> *“For years I was everyone except myself.*
>
> *For years I was a shadow that only breathed.*
>
> *But today, for the first time, I am living.*
>
> *I no longer want to be anyone’s shadow, nor to make anyone my shadow.*
>
> *I only want to be human; the same human being God created from the beginning, and whom I wandered seventy years in search of.”*

His friend said nothing.

He only smiled.

Perhaps he had not understood all of Boromand’s words; but he had understood the peace in his face.

Boromand looked at the sky.

He murmured:

> *“O Lord!*
>
> *Thank You that, before the death of my body, You woke me from the sleep of my soul.*
>
> *Now, even if death comes, I no longer fear it; for what had to come alive has come alive.”*

A gentle breeze blew.

The trees swayed softly.

The sun, without asking anyone’s permission, shone on all alike.

Boromand smiled.

He had understood that truth is neither in fame, nor in power, nor in the praise of people; truth is a human being’s reconciliation with himself.

And that day…

in a silence to which only God was witness,

the shadow fell silent…

and the human being drew his first breath of freedom.

When Basir Shafaq, or Boromand, drew the first breath of knowing himself into his soul, it was as if all the past years collapsed on his shoulders. He struck himself against the stones of reproach; not for destruction, but for awakening.

He said to himself:

> *“What a pity… I have spent seventy years of my life in the sleight of hand of being; sometimes this, sometimes that; sometimes nothing and sometimes everything.”*

And how painful it is for a person who thinks he is alive but has lived for years in endless roles.

He remembered:

One day he was a teacher, one day a fighter, one day an official, one day a writer, one day a poet, and at times a mullah; sometimes a denier of everything, and sometimes drowned in beliefs.

Sometimes he took himself for a lion, as though the world began with him, and sometimes he was so timid that he did not take even his own shadow seriously.

He realized that none of these faces was “he”; they were only roles put upon him. He was like water, which takes the shape of whatever vessel it is in, without knowing its own true shape.

Sometimes he became a philosopher, sometimes the simplest of men; sometimes he had the noblest feelings, and sometimes he was lost in the darkness of selfishness and violence. But none of it was his truth.

This cycle went on for seventy years; not once, but again and again.

He was ashamed of his flatteries; of the imitations he had performed in the name of “personality”; of those moments when he thought he was playing “being someone,” while he was only a moving shadow.

Many times he had said under his breath:

> *“I am a scholar… I am a writer… I understand things…”*

But inside there was nothing but anxiety and emptiness.

And this was where the “mental egos” had made their home in him; each gave a role, put on a garment, and sent him to a new stage.

His life was like the reels of a cinema; but not a calm film, rather a series of tragedies, bitter comedies, moments of shame and fall.

Now, as he looked back, only one truth weighed on his heart:

“If only, all these years, I had been myself…”

Sometimes envy and selfishness drove him to the brink of collapse, especially when he felt that others did not accept him. Then, involuntarily, he would bend to win approval, as a lost person runs after a familiar shadow.

Even his friends drew away from him, and he still ran after them, with a tired heart and a restless soul.

Now, at the moment of writing these lines, sweat of shame stood on his forehead; not for the past, but for the lateness of his awareness.

He did not hate his past, but he did hate the unawareness that had kept him in bondage for years.

Yet in his heart a gentle light was burning:

Thanks to the God who acquainted him with Mawlana Jalaluddin, Ibn Arabi, Ferdowsi, Khayyam and Hafez;

so that in the last chapter of his life he might understand that a person can cross from “being a shadow” to “being himself.”

Now he was neither in search of roles nor afraid of judgments.

He only wanted to be…

A human being who breathes.

A human being who is himself.

And this was the beginning of his awakening…

“A book that began with knowing oneself ended with becoming human.”

Author’s Note

At the end of this book, I feel obliged to make an honest confession to the readers and to all my friends and acquaintances.

Life has taken me through many hard ups and downs and bitter trials. Without doubt, the pressures of the times have at moments affected my conduct, my speech and my judgment. If, over the years, knowingly or unknowingly, by a word, a deed or a silence, I have hurt the heart of a friend, today with utmost sincerity and humility I ask his forgiveness.

I have never consciously intended enmity, harm or disrespect toward any human being; rather, my heartfelt belief has always been that all living beings, even plants, deserve love, respect and kindness.

If I have stumbled anywhere, I count it among my own shortcomings, not as enmity toward others. I hope that all the dear ones who have been hurt by me will be generous and accept this sincere apology.

With wishes of love, peace and humanity for all,

With great respect,

Basir Shafaq

The End