

Fixture
Akhtar Mohiuddin
Translated by Ishrat Bashir

Introductory Note

Novelist, playwright and short story writer, Akhtar Mohiuddin, was born on 17 April 1928 in Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir. He lived in Lal Bazaar until his death in 2001. One of the pioneers of modern short story in Kashmiri, Mohiuddin has authored many collections of short stories, novels, travelogues, and plays. Mohiuddin published his first collection of short stories, *Sat Sangar* (Seven Peaks) in 1955. That was followed by *Sonzal* (Rainbow) in 1959. *Vanun ma Baniyam* and *Seven One Nine Seven Nine and Other Stories* were published posthumously in 2009. He has also published two novels, *Daud Dug* (*Disease and Pain*) and *Zuv Te zolana* (*Precarious Life*). His novel *Jahanumukh Panun panun Naar* (*To Each According to His Own Hell*) was also published posthumously. Mohiuddin has been honoured with many prestigious awards including Padam Shri (1968), the fourth highest civilian award given in India.

Akhtar Mohiuddin believed that ‘Great art is one in which we can hear the very heartbeat of life, and on whose lips we can see the innocent smile of a small child’. He would call art ‘the apple of life’s eye’. That is why his works throb with the life of ordinary people around him. They reflect the society he lived in. His later works deal with the popular uprising of 1990s in Kashmir. In fact, Akhtar Mohiuddin renounced his Padam Shri in the wake of mass killings during this movement in Kashmir. Akhtar Mohiuddin skillfully used the modernist fictional techniques of stream of consciousness and interior monologue in his works. The short story *Fixture* included in *Seven One Nine Seven Nine and Other Stories* (2009) is in the form of an interior monologue.

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Fixture

That peg on the wall, I have no clue when it was fixed or who fixed it. I have always seen it there. To me it is an inseparable part of the wall. If ever I won't see it there, it will seem to me that the wall has lost some important part of itself because of which it could no longer support the house. The house will collapse at any moment and everything will turn to dust and there will be an apocalypse.

However, I had faith that I will always see this peg nailed to the wall. I looked at it all the time. Sometimes I would steal a cursory glance at it even during the night, and seeing it there would think that everything in the universe was in order. It made me sure and certain that the earth was spinning on its axis without any impediment.

The peg had never let me lose this faith. It seemed to have been there for ever and would remain till the very end. It was like the sun that appears at the horizon every morning and sets at the time when it should. Who would ever sleep with the fear that there will be no dawn? How could one sleep in peace with that fear? One is always sure to see the crescent at the end of every month – if not on the 29th but on 30th for sure! Won't one lose calm if this does not happen? Everyone has faith; absolute faith that every sunset is followed by a sunrise and every sunrise by a sunset. No doubt in it! Similarly I never had any doubt or fear that this peg on the wall would not be there someday. How could I? It had been always there. It was there before my birth and all my life I found it there. It was a fixture. Fixtures don't change either their form or place. It is not in their nature. But for one thing!

Above this peg on the wall was fixed a tiny square painted wooden shelf. And on this shelf was a photo. Not exactly a photo; we must call it a picture because it was the picture of a man who, according to hearsay, lived 1,750,000 years ago. There would have then been no cameras to take his photo with. Even if there had been one, the photograph could not have been preserved for millions of years. Neither camera nor photograph is a fixture but yes, Time is! 1,750,000 years! Now you only understood my meaning, not the essence. You can't get the essence for I too don't have words to express it in. However, let us both assume that time is a fixture, it has been always there.

The man in the picture on the little square wooden shelf, who is said to have lived 1,750,000 years ago, has no special quality in himself. He has got a small forehead with fur on his face, neck and head. But one of his prominent features is his eyes which are small but crystal clear as a lake as if they have never known any unpleasant and evil thing. It seems that sin has not even touched him.

Sitting at the top, he keeps surveying the surroundings with his small eyes. The look on his lips sometimes strike fear into my heart that he is staring at my sins – sins that I hide even from myself.

At such times, I just avert my gaze from it, turn a deaf ear and hum a tune. But when nothing works, his looks pierce me like arrowheads and then I look at him shamefacedly with helpless eyes and say silently, 'I am trapped in this world. I have to wear masks upon mask'. But his piercing steady gaze circumscribes me like a bridle that pulls me down and down to the dark cave of time, that cave which no one knows about. I feel short of breath, and dreadful.

But on that day I feel all the bridles breaking away and such a feeling of freedom overwhelms me as would follow taking a decision after being in a terrible dilemma. Whether it brings reward or punishment is not the question. What is

important is the sense of freedom and end of the entire abyss. Such a sense of absolute freedom do I get when I see my overcoat or suit or any other piece of my clothing hanging on the peg. What I feel then is that the picture on the shelf above the peg has assumed the face of this world with the hook of Time, a fixture, nailed to its heart. And having travelled 1,750,000 years in a moment, it hangs there in my shape analysing the environs. On that day, his small eyes no longer appear crystal clear and pure. But they drip with thick, dirty black drool of deceit and fraud, hypocrisy and dishonesty. His forehead no longer appears small but big with so many lines across it like a square of a long endless road where one not only loses his way but one's innocence as well, or where one is crushed under the wheels of Time to become prey of poor ants.

Many a time I think to ask him in the dead of night whether ...!! But what shall I ask him? Can my voice reach 1,750,000 years back? Yes! If my coat is hung on the peg below the picture, the picture will assume my face. Only then is it possible to ask him. No, not even then! At that time won't it be me, myself? Then I will have to ask myself and answer it myself. Is it possible for me to reach to myself? That too when we two are distanced apart, estranged. What affinity do we have that we could commune?

Would that the impossible would become possible ... That both of us were nailed with the same fixture in the heart ... Maybe we can meet then ... I and me! And 1,750,000 years will be travelled in a moment.