

Camelia and Raheem: The Shaken hand

Early at night, Raheem and Alif have been invited to the town palace to meet with Camelia. They arrive with their large turbans and their desert clothes that glitter blue under the artificial lights. They wait at the door of the palace, observing the English gentry giving a ball.

- Assalam Alaikum, announces Raheem to the guard.
- Wa Alaikum Assalam. What can I do for you, brother?
- We have come to meet the lady Camelia.
- Wait here while I announce you. Hide in that corner.

Both men move to the retreat on one side of the garden. The huge windows of the palace display the ball and its sophisticated dancers before their eyes. Suddenly they get a glimpse of camellia at the arm of a man.

Alif gasps, angry. He spats,

- I told you, my friend, she has no morale.
- And why is that, Alif?
- Look, she is not married however she lets a stranger take her by the waist. There is no modesty in that woman!
- Her modesty is in her eyes. Look the way she averts them, refusing to speak to him. She is being polite for accepting the waltz.
- But look at her hejab! There is nothing left to the imagination of the eyes!
- Didn't you notice?
- What?
- She actually drew a veil over her shoulders and over her bosom. She looks different from the other women.

Alif looks inquisitively around the room. His eyes open wide.

- Yes, you are right, Raheem. She looks the most decent among the company even though she looks indecent compared to Muslim women.
- Exactly so. You have to see from her perspective, her values.

In her country, she must be looked upon as modest. She believes in God, Alif; she fears Allah; she just has different traditions in a different culture. But a woman's hejab is first in her eyes. The eyes are the mirrors of the soul and if they look freezing, they cannot attract. There are women who wear hejab and look desirable but there are women who do not wear any veil but set you on your way.

- Still, Raheem, the hejab is compulsory.
- Still it is compulsory.

A few minutes later, Camelia runs in their direction, pulling a satin shawl over her arms and head out of respect.

- Raheem! Alif! My friends, she exclaims. I am so glad to see you. You saved me from the most boring evening there is. And what brings you here?

She holds up her hands towards Alif, forgetting for a moment he is Muslim. She smiles. Alif hesitates, appears fidgeting a few seconds, then decides to

make a concession. He puts his hand in the pocket of his baggy jellaba and shakes her hands through the fabric. He excuses himself. Camelia looks shocked but still smiles at him and says good night. Alif leaves.

She sighs, and then confesses.

- I have done my best, Raheem. I have been nice to your friend Alif all I could. I have acknowledged him, tried to speak to him, but he is like a barrier. He seems like he always hates me.

- Why on earth are you saying that, lady?

- The way he looks at me, and the way he shook my hand! He has such dislike for Western women!

Raheem suddenly bursts out laughing; tears run out of his eyes.

- Dear lady! He does not dislike you. I would rather say he does not understand you; you are a puzzle to him. If he shook your hand, he actually did you a favor; it was actually more like a mark of respect.

Camelia looks astonished.

- A mark of respect? She breathes in a whisper.

- No Muslim man can shake your hand. You see, lady, there is no physical contact between genders, except of course between relatives.

- O, I see, exclaims Camelia, smiling and feeling a little flattered.

She blushes, then says:

- What a goose I am!