

World Science Fiction Spring 2019

Islamicates Volume 1: Anthology of Science Fiction short stories inspired from Muslim Cultures

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Operation Miraj

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Albuquerque Road, New Delhi, India

Local Time: 1630 hours

Date: 30th July, 1948

It was another beautiful, overcast evening. A soft breeze soothed her parched face, and Summaya Chughtai craned her neck in the direction of the dark, delicious clouds gathering above her. She saw a *shaheen* Falcon dive down to grab a hapless pigeon and majestically disappear into the depths of the unruly skies.

Summaya unconsciously ran her hand through her short burgundy hair and returned her gaze to the street – desirous of locating familiar landmarks to navigate better. The road was too crowded for her liking, she noticed with a sigh. Exfiltration might be a problem if conditions remained the same, she thought. But Sumayya also knew that a confused, panicked crowd was the best ally one could have to escape, especially after what she was about to do.

Clouds played hide and seek with the setting sun; beams of sunlight filtered through the well-trimmed *Ashoka* trees which lined the avenue. An ancient rickshaw creaked past her. Its bare-chested, emaciated driver pedaled furiously, and turned back to leer at her frame. Summaya noticed the passenger, a medium-built, well-dressed man in his late thirties, ogle at her contemptuously. Propelled by a sudden gust, his flapping *kurta*¹ brushed against her right elbow. She instinctively shrank back. Years in military service had not made her comfortable with an alien touch.

Summaya suppressed a warm liquid moving from her stomach towards her mouth, burning her windpipe as it rose. Perhaps it had something to do with the bumpy aircraft ride on her way to Delhi.

Time jumps were never easy.

Summaya instinctively spat and wiped her mouth with her sleeve. She thanked Allah that her act didn't attract any undue attention – thanks to the *gutkha*²-chewing people around her.

She focused on the road – it was bustling with studied inactivity. People thronged the area and the crowds – a moving, breathing mass of bodies

¹ A kurta is a loose garment worn on the upper-part of the body.

² A form of tobacco which is consumed orally.

– moved in the same direction she was headed towards. She slowed down to a leisurely ramble. A vendor was selling roasted peanuts right in front of her; temporary stalls had come up every few feet to serve milky, sugary tea. She continued walking, a bulky camera slung around her neck. Suddenly, out of nowhere, something hit her cheek – she cringed inwardly. Through the corner of her eyes, she could sense it was one of those wretched yellow wasps again – it caressed her face and sped away, its stinging venom, thankfully, still safely tucked in its belly.

The wasp. It reminded Summaya how she hated *tataiyas* in her home base *Mushaf* – yellow wasps which had the habit of emerging out of nowhere and lunging for unsuspecting victims. She narrowed her eyes and tried to make sense of the alien world around her.

The past few hours had been a blur, even by her standards. Summaya had been in the middle of a routine training exercise when she was ordered to scramble and report to the nearest hangar – in full gear. Once she reached there, Summaya had been bundled with a couple of others on a *Buraq* bound for India. They were briefed about their mission en route – that too by the Director General (DG) himself. To top it all, she had been made an *Alif* for the first time in her life.

Perhaps her hard work had paid off, she mused, or maybe it was pity by the top-brass. Summaya was assigned to be the leader of this operation, and was given two others to help her out. No names were exchanged as the trio flew from Sargodha to Delhi, but Summaya could tell their units from their bearing. She, the commander, was responsible for taking out the target. *Bey*, her second in command, was tasked with tracking the mark. *Bey* was a surly, middle-aged officer from the SSG – Summaya knew that the moment he had boarded the aircraft, put on heavy metal

on his earphones, and looked right past her in the flight with an insolence only the Special Forces could have mustered. Summaya looked at *Pey*, her third team member. *Pey* – a tall, painfully thin man in his late twenties – sat in a corner, blissfully immersed in a copy of *Qisas-ul-Anbiya*. He was their transporter – it was his task to move the team to and from the target. His quiet, shifty mannerism made Summaya suspect that he might be from the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).

When they had received their orders en route, Summaya had inwardly baulked at first. Such hits needed months to plan and execute – this was *big*. However, she had been given her first chance to command a team. When she was given this task by the DG – who had briefed the team through a thought-link – she had only nodded and suppressed a shiver of zeal run through her spine.

As the aircraft made its way towards the international border, Summaya read more about the target and then distributed specific clothing to be worn during the operation. They then prepared for the jump – both of the *Buraq* and then of their para-drop. Summaya was in the process of reciting the fourth *kalma* when the AI onboard the *Buraq* pumped the aircraft full of gasses in order to acclimatize her for the jump. An uneasy drowsiness overtook Summaya's team.

It was time to play with the stars.

Army Strategic Temporal Command (ASTAC) Headquarters, Islamabad,
Pakistan

Local Time: 1100 hours

Date: 7th July, 2035

Major Abdullah Yousafzai shifted in the aristocratic leather chair he was cocooned in, and looked around the exquisitely-decorated, opulent office space. A crystal chandelier hung in the centre of the room; rows of wooden bookcases – containing rare tomes on military history – lined the high walls and a rich carpet covered the marble-floor. Yousafzai knew the grandeur of the room was well deserved.

This was where it all had begun.

Almost a decade ago, Pakistan – like a few other zealous nations – had acquired temporal displacement technology from a Scandinavian corporation, that too at an extremely steep price. While the technology was still in its nascent stages, and was not fully tested, salivating governments had pumped billions into its research and development. The ongoing Sino-Pak-India conflict had taken a toll on the conscience of the South Asian sub-continent. The first to succeed in making this technology work was an American scientist – who, incidentally, chose to return to the country his parents were born in. Whether his zeal was driven by a desire to give back to the country of his forefathers, or the massive amounts of US dollars the ISI had transferred into his Swiss accounts, no one knew.

Within a couple of months, this technology was deemed safe for deployment in the field –ASTAC, thus, came into being: an elite corps, the crème de la crème of Pakistani Army, one which reported directly to the National Command Authority (NCA). There used to be a time when the NCA used to oversee nuclear deployment. However, with South Asia divested of all WMDs after a thorough UN-led combing operation, NCA had become a toothless tiger – until the ASTAC delivered the mother of all weapons into Pakistan's lap.

Time.

Major Yousafzai observed the man sitting in front of him – his commanding officer. Lieutenant General Saif-ul-Islam, Director General of ASTAC, was a frail looking man with intense eyes, furry eyebrows and a hooked nose. A man of few words, and even fewer compunctions. Dressed in a spotless white *pathani* suit, Saif-ul-Islam sat poring over a cyber-file. Lines of worry were clearly etched on his bronze forehead; Yousafzai could see a vein throbbing in the general's temple. His mental gears, as they say, were grinding.

“Report.” The general casually glanced up at Yousafzai, spoke in a soft, somber tone and returned to study the file.

“GHQ³ has not authenticated the order, sir. I reconfirmed,” Yousafzai immediately complied.

General Saif-ul-Islam looked up at Yousafzai and shook his head in unhappiness. “Doesn’t mean we can’t go ahead.”

Yousafzai felt the need to clarify. “Sir, GHQ has *not* authorized Operation Mi’raj.”

Saif-ul-Islam merely smiled. “Screw GHQ. This is straight from the NCA, Major.”

“But sir...protocol demands...” Yousafzai spluttered.

Saif-ul-Islam waved a dismissive hand at Yousafzai. “Override GHQ. How many more do we lose before the Neo-*mujahideen* realize they’ve fucked up big time...again? Do you want this bloodshed to continue forever?”

³ General Headquarters, or GHQ, refers to the top-brass of the army.

Yousafzai squirmed uncomfortably. "No, sir. Of course not."

"We have to ensure fundamental changes happen in South Asian politics." Saif-ul-Islam remarked more emphatically than he usually did.

Yousafzai could sense that General Saif-ul-Islam was not in favour of a military solution; this led him to assume he perhaps had his own axe to grind.

"Sir, without authorization we cannot..."

"I am authorizing you to activate Operation Mi'raj. I have talked to the president." Steel crept in the general's voice, "Scramble a Buraq. I will brief the team en route. This is a direct order."

Yousafzai nodded unhappily.

"Clear?"

"Sir... I still do not understand why we have to do this."

"The president and the NCA have their reasons, irrespective of what the GHQ might think. Preventing someone's death is in the strategic interests of the entire sub-continent."

Yousafzai's mind raced to make sense of it all. He had a gut feeling that the war would end soon enough – it was only a question of which country was able to absorb more blows to its civilian populaces. Yousafzai also knew that ASTAC had to be at the forefront of national defence – and time, of all the things, was fast running out. He knew ASTAC only had logistical and technical support for two temporal incursions. One had already been executed – successfully. The particulars of the second and last mission were being deliberated by senior officers at the GHQ. Almost all senior corps commanders, as

Yousafzai understood, wanted the second team to stay back in India and use their knowledge of future events to strategically infiltrate systems, institutions and nations.

“But why, sir, if I may ask? Our first mission... keeping Quaid-i-Azam⁴ alive has already succeeded and...”

The general’s eyes lit up as he cut his junior short. “Thank God we were able to send advanced medicines to help him. Baba-i-Qaum would live till the 1970s, *inshallah!*”

Yousafzai was not one to cave in so easily. “But sir, shouldn’t we be focusing on more important objectives?”

“We need *this*.” The general’s voice suddenly became soft, as if all fight had been taken out of it. “Son, I ask you do this not only for me but for all of Pakistan. You will understand it in the long run. That man needs to live – and another needs to die. If this happens then the India we fight in ‘65 and ‘71 will be a very, very *different* one.”

Yousafzai was a military man, after all. If he was told to do something, his mind didn’t linger for long on the *why* of it, but soon came around to discussing the *how*.

“Who will be the Alif, sir? Anyone special you are looking for?”

“Send a woman. Easier access,” General Saif-ul-Islam replied casually.

“What about Chughtai? She deserves a shot at redemption.”

“Wilco, sir.

Yousafzai could start making some sense out of the general’s cryptic remarks. There was no use delaying the inevitable. He had realized the

⁴ A title given to Mohammad Ali Jinnah.

politics of it all was well beyond his pay grade – and his mental horizons. “I will assemble the team and prep them for briefing, sir.”

“Good, thank you very much.” Saif-ul-Islam muttered a bit sarcastically. The general was still a bit irritated at being questioned.

Yousafzai stood up, saluted the general, and walked out.

Saif-ul-Islam briefly smiled at his receding figure, and returned to his files, his eyes twinkling.

The hunt was on.

Albuquerque Road, New Delhi, India

Local Time: 1700 hours

Date: 30th July, 1948

Summaya woke up just minutes before their drop-point. The plan was to have them para-drop at a remote location just outside Delhi. Once on the ground, they were to catch local transport, pose as tourists and mingle with the crowd. It was not unheard of – history-laden Delhi was a tourist delight.

Things had proceeded as per plan, though Summaya could swear she had felt something really strange the moment she had jumped out of the Buraq – a specially modified Lockheed C-130 Hercules armed with a temporal shift device – and cleared the blue-green mist surrounding their transport since the moment it took off. Summaya had not been surprised when they had passed undetected through Indian airspace. A Buraq of 2035 AD would be invisible to radar technology of 1948. No

wonder the Indian Air Force had failed to scramble fighters to intercept her transport, she realized.

They had landed safely and then trekked to their rendezvous, where they were promptly met by the “leaguers” – sleeper cells of helpers who assisted the daily operations of her organization. The leaguers were right on schedule, with a smile on their lips and *samosas* in their hands. They then herded Summaya’s team into an old bullock cart and dropped them at their predetermined positions.

A bark jolted her back to reality. She was back in a central Delhi street a long, long time ago. She cursed herself for getting distracted and looked at the source of commotion. A little, brown pup stood swaying on the pavement, eyeing the passing rickshaws. A crow came dangerously close to it and the pup backed off till it hit the leg of a man who sat on the ground.

She saw the malnourished, gaunt man, clad in a dirty loincloth, raise a glass of the tea at the brown pup and mutter some unintelligible phrases. Summaya watched in wonder as the pup, with its tail now wagging, trotted towards this man, who, in all likelihood, was a poor labourer. Summaya could tell this from his clothing – or the lack of it. He was just another of the million toiling souls from the subcontinent who tried desperately to somehow make ends meet – and failed.

The man reached for a packet kept to his left. The pup stopped dead in its tracks, afraid. The man merely smiled and beckoned the pup to come closer. Summaya came to a halt and watched the events unfolding in front of her with an open mouth.

The pup, having realized it was not going to be stoned, resumed wagging its tail and playfully bounded up to him. It put his paw on the

man's dirt-caked feet and looked at his face. The man had, by then, opened the packet and taken out two moldy rusks. He dunked one in his tea threw it at the pup. The other, he put in his mouth. Summaya saw this man, on the cusp of acute starvation, give half of his breakfast to a hungry pup twice the size of his palm.

The mongrel lunged towards the food, slowly sniffed it with its little bulbous nose, and then cautiously licked it. Finding it edible, it shot the man a grateful look, clutched the food in its mouth, and ran away to safety under a stationary *tanga*⁵.

The man, too, got up, rolled a filthy white cloth in a bun over his head – so it could balance the bricks which he carried at construction site he worked at – and walked away.

Summaya gently smiled, her heart feeling better all of a sudden.

“Target spotted,” a voice rang in her head.

It was Bey, communicating to her on the earpiece she had plugged in her left ear.

“Be there in 5,” she said in between hurried strides to no one in particular. She cursed herself for getting distracted. Summaya hit the road with a renewed zeal.

In a few, crisp moments, she was standing at the gates of Birla House.

The area was even more crowded than she had imagined. She saw scores of *khadi*-clad men trying to channel the crowd in an orderly fashion. She smiled at a volunteer and pointed at her camera. The bored volunteer saw a curvaceous red-head, stopped dead in his tracks, and

⁵ A horse-driven cart used to ferry passengers and goods.

started walking towards her instead.

“Are you...a tourist?” He shouted even before he was in range.

“International press,” Summaya, trying hard to look startled, muttered in unaccented English, “...can I see him?”

The volunteer scrutinized her carefully; his eyes lingered on her camera for a moment too long, and then grinned from ear to ear. He took her hand and led her across the crowd, cutting through the shoving horde with a practiced ease, and got her waved across three police checkpoints.

Summaya saw Bey and Pey standing at their locations, trying not to stick out in this strange land.

The stage was set.

The volunteer took her to the very front and Summaya gasped at what she saw. People were standing on two sides of a narrow lane, leaving space for him to pass. The atmosphere was electric. Summaya had seen this many times, this was how many mass-movements began, but this was somehow different. People were charged up, yet there was also an intrinsic self-control at play. Had she not known better, she would have thought that the orthodox, eager Hindus, calm, bearded Muslims, and lanky, turbaned Sikhs, around her were actually there to pray.

“Visual at 8.” Bey curtly barked at her.

Summaya started at the words. She scanned around and saw him. The target had walked right in front of her. An Indian male with an unsure gait with a face she was made to memorize.

“In sight,” she acknowledged and clutched the camera firmly in her

hands.

A loud cheer went up. An elderly man had come out of the house, along with five others who followed him respectfully. The thin, wiry man was dressed in a white *dhoti* and carried a walking stick. He was supported by two young women who helped him walk. The man wore spectacles and his eyes twinkled as he looked around. His lips split in a good-natured grin and he bent low as people showered him with petals.

He was coming towards her. Before she could think any further, Pey reported in. "Get ready!"

Summaya stared at the scene unfolding in front of her eyes. The target moved to intercept the wizened old man. The group stopped reluctantly – someone sighed in frustration. The target bent down and touched the old man's feet; he patiently waited for the young man to complete paying his respects.

The young man got up and then threw himself at the old man's feet again.

Summaya could sense something radiating from this young man – the very same tightening of her heart that she had felt on her first combat mission.

A girl started walking towards the man to remove him from their path. She said in a cross, patronizing tone, "Brother... Bapu is already late."

The young man did not hear her. When the girl tried to stop him, the youth got up angrily and pushed the girl aside with a loud shout. Within the blink of an eye, he had reached for a Beretta M1934 semi-automatic pistol that he had concealed in his trousers.

He pointed the weapon at the wizened old man – who merely stared

back at his assailant less with fear, and more with surprise and pity.

Summaya could hear a collective gasp. The man who they had congregated to see was under attack. Every single individual there was too shocked to react. Everyone – except Summaya.

Summaya, her senses honed, observed the split-second when the target's finger started to squeeze the trigger of his Beretta. This was the signal Summaya had been waiting for. She had already positioned the camera directly behind the target. She clicked and the shutter parted. A silenced bolt hit the target, incapacitating him instantly.

The target fell on the ground, writhing in pain. There was no sound from him. No one had seen the cyanide-laced, dissolvable micro-projectile make its way from her camera to the neck of the target, causing death in less than five seconds.

The would-be-assassin had been assassinated moments before he completed his mission, ostensibly of a cardiac-arrest.

Mouths opened in shock; a scream thundered through the air. Footsteps. People had started running – some away, some towards the epicenter.

Summaya whirled back and started walking away. She knew she was above suspicion. Her hurrying away would be seen as a sign of fear and shock, not guilt.

“Done. Get out. Now!” Her earpiece buzzed excitedly.

She hurried away and was soon swallowed by the crowd. The target was dead. She had been successful on her first mission as Alif. She felt proud of herself.

Before Summaya – and her team – left for their pre-designated extraction point, she vividly recalled the elderly gentleman bend down, sorrowfully gaze into the unblinking eyes of the target and paternally clutch his unmoving hand in a show of genuine sorrow. Summaya had seen enough death to know which sorrow was real – and which one was put on as a mask for the world to see.

The old man shut the target's eyelids with two bony fingers, felt the deathly still chest and painfully croaked to himself, shocked that a person had been murdered at his prayer meeting.

Summaya still remembered the two words out of the elderly gentleman's mouth before he was whisked away by his zealous supporters, worried that another assassin might pay him a visit. She could never forget how the old man looked into the dead eyes of the target and chanted two words that made her blood run cold, words which still echoed in her ears every time she closed her eyes and prepared to sleep.

Two short, crisp words, which sounded somewhat religious to her at first, but later acquired a meaning much, much deeper than that.

Two simple words.

“Hey Ram.”