

## The Old Man of the Banyan Tree

The old man of the banyan tree,  
stood with his young daughter in the square,  
pleading, "Is anyone there,  
who'll exorcise the shadow  
hovering over my daughter's head?  
Gentlemen, sir, listen."  
No one listened

They all went by, gathering their shadows with them.

It so happened one day,  
a *maulvi* came and said,

"Old man, bring me the innocent child,  
and Allah's grace will set your daughter free."

At midnight in the square,  
the *maulvi* lit a lamp and asked,

"Child, what do you see in the flame?"

"Nothing!"

The *maulvi* recited a prayer and said,  
"Speak, child, speak!"

Thousands hung on the child's lips.

"*Maulvi sahib*, I see a face."

"Good. Can you recognize this limb of Satan?"

The child lifted her eyes a moment,

"Mmmm *Maulvi sahib*," she stammered, "It's your face."

"Away, you infidel's seed,  
bastard! Get out of my sight."

The *maulvi* brandished his shoe.

"It's the *maulvi*'s shadow that troubles the girl," jeered the crowd.  
And they all went off, gathering their shadows with them.

"Is there any charitable man?  
Someone?  
Anyone?"

Now a necromancer drew a circle around the girl,  
and went about in a loincloth, chanting,

"In 90 days the ring will break  
and the girl will be free of the jinn."

The ninety days passed in a wink,  
and lo, the sage was in, and the girl circling.  
"Help, help," he cried, "the spell's overturned."

He ran off leaving his clothes behind.  
The crowd jested, "the jinn is out, the sage in."  
And they all left, gathering their shadows with them.

"Is there any charitable one?  
Is there? Is there?"

Years passed and no one came.

At last, one day,

the old man took his girl by the throat and cried,

"Who are you?  
Unveil yourself.

Why do you trouble this innocent girl?"

Her body trembled  
the eyes relaxed,  
and slowly her lips parted,  
the old man's voice came back to him, "Who are you?  
Unveil yourself  
why do you trouble this innocent girl?"

*Sarmad Sehbai*