



BEYOND THE
~ CAYENNE WALL ~

COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES
SHAILA ABDULLAH

An excerpt

Beyond the Cayenne Wall
Collection of Short Stories

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1-800-Authors (1-800-288-4677)

ISBN-13: 978-0-595-37009-2 (pbk)
ISBN-13: 978-0-595-81417-6 (ebk)
ISBN-10: 0-595-37009-8 (pbk)
ISBN-10: 0-595-81417-4 (ebk)

Printed in the United States of America

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ashes to ashes, dust to dust

Dhool wrapped her severely patched *chador* around her form and crouched on the corner of the deserted lot apprehensively. Out of her speckled yet haunting face, her russet eyes darted all around as if she were a raven that was about to swoop to the ground in search of food, her senses extremely alert to danger. Her pupils caught the buzzing fluorescent streetlight and shone, frightened. Somewhere in her line of vision, a dog-eared, yellowing magazine page with the face of a famous movie star performed a waltz with some plastic shopping bags around the squashed soda can on the quiet street. The page seemed to beckon to her, and Dhool resisted the urge to run and swoop it into the trash bag she carried. Although morning had dawned, the slumbering city had still not stirred, and Dhool prayed that it remain that way until she found enough paper to take to the reprocessing factory. Her state of mind was a strange paradox of fear and aggravated impatience at the nature of her surroundings. She was determined to lose her predator, but she also needed to get back to her means of livelihood. She couldn't disappoint her children. One more day without food would be the ultimate test and

could also prove to be a fatal one.

Absently she thought of the pot she had left on the stove last night to comfort her four famished children. Unbeknownst to them, it was a pot full of nothing but water and stones. Soothed by the steam coming out of the pot in translucent slivers and the thought of the hot meal that awaited them, the children had gone to bed, tired of waiting.

The eldest one was wise and saw right through Dhool's handiwork. Tara was sometimes too wise for her own good, and Dhool lamented the fact that the girl had been forced to let go of her childhood early in life to take on adult responsibilities. The forlorn child's image washed in front of Dhool—eleven-year-old Tara with an infant perched precariously on one hip, another emaciated little one draped around her scrawny legs. Sometimes in homes such as hers, the older child assumes responsibility for the results of her parent's mistakes, and in Dhool's case there were five of them. Five mistakes in one lifetime!

And the very first one was the person she was married to.

When she was sure that no living being was in sight, she stood up and ran across the street, heading straight for the dumpster on the opposite side right next to the green rundown paper factory, scooping the magazine page up on her way. Before she was even halfway across, a strong hand gripped her wrist from behind and turned her around forcibly.

"You thought you were going to get away today, huh?"

The voice was full of malice, and Dhool faced the person in sheer terror. It was the one she feared, and there was no mercy on his face as he looked at her with harsh, piercing eyes.

"You have a lot to pay," he said as he smiled through two rows of rotting teeth. "Certainly a lot to pay."

She screamed, but her cries were muffled by her predator's hand covering her mouth and in the farfar of the feral pigeons that flew off in a faithful flock toward the terrace of the little house adjacent to the post office.

The village of Masaghan Jheel approximately one hundred miles southwest of Karachi was once an estuarine area that brought enough to feed the masses of the squatted settlements dotted along the coast of the Arabian Sea. The villagers had depended on the sea for generations; they had no other means of livelihood other than fishing. That was, until the impecunious government sold out and gave deep-sea fishing rights to the foreigners. Their fishing trawlers roamed the sea in their offensive magnificence and left the teeming ten thousand or so impoverished locals out to dry. Days would go by, and local fishermen would return to the shore of the oil-blackened sea with nothing to show for their efforts, the wooden buckets that had once overflowed with succulent mounds of bombil, palla and mallah now agonizingly empty. The sea was no longer their friend.

As always in any equation, women had to bear the brunt of that transgression. Men stopped going to the sea, tired of their futile searches, and instead sat around all day in chai shops perched on little straw stools or charpoy sipping cup after cup of the delightfully sweet beverage and discussing politics, making sense of it all in their limited literacy. Occasionally they tossed out a game of cards and continued on with their meaningless existence, impervious to the household nagging, until the women tired of being ignored ventured out in search of livelihood themselves. Some like Dhool ended up becoming ragpickers.

Scores of people like Dhool got up early in the morning to rush out in search of scraps to sell, even as the apex donned a steely blue gossamer gown with wispy layers of lazy gray clouds floating across the infinite sky. By six they all huddled around in a semicircle at the dumping ground, some with torn slippers hopping around as the cold asphalt came in contact with their skin, braving the weather, some with tattered or patched clothing like Dhool. Each pair of those eyes would be hungrily glued to the path where the municipal corporation's truck pulled in every morning and unloaded the garbage collected from all over the city. They would eye each other suspiciously. Among them there was an unspoken code: people who collected paper would not touch glass, and glass collectors would steer clear of pa-

per. Dhool was a paper collector. Upon the dumping, amid the toxic fumes, the discarded and soiled sanitary napkins, the shards of glass and metal chunks, they bore down like vultures at the prized treasure, scavenging vigorously for the means of their bread and butter. Occasionally fights would break out, but the other members of that unnamed league would quickly dissipate them.

Once they were done with the dumping ground they would break off and go their separate ways into residential and commercial dwelling areas. The last job of the day and perhaps the most difficult one was to drag the bag of scraps to the trader's shop miles away even as the afternoon sun shone mercilessly down on their tired and worn-out bodies. In the end, women like Dhool managed to collect twenty five rupees after a brief daily skirmish with the trader. On good days she even goaded him to pay fifty. It would barely get her through that day—that is, if Dilawar didn't snatch it from her to spend on yet another round of futile card games that he so faithfully lost each day.

At times ragpickers were beaten up or verbally abused by the watchmen and gatekeepers who treated them like thieves. One such person was Billa. Notorious for his rage and impudence, Billa protected his territory, a commercial paper factory—a goldmine for ragpickers such as Dhool—as if it belonged exclusively to him. Only those scrap collectors were allowed in his area who were his special friends or who took care of him periodically by giving him *bhatta*, or illegal toll.

Dhool was not one of them. She stubbornly refused to pay her way through Billa's area. Her needs were too big, the money forthcoming too small. She huddled around the boundary of his area and watched when he was not around to venture in and scavenge the dumpster for the prized loot—in her case, paper.

Some days Dhool took her son, Paryal, on her daily excursions. He was born mentally challenged, and the circumstances were made even more taxing by the fact that Dilawar did not acknowledge his presence in his life—not that he considered the existence of any other members of his household. Perhaps the birth of a daughter followed

by a disabled son and then two more daughters disappointed him and hurt his manhood. He had always wanted a son, and Paryal did not fulfill that need in him. Paryal was a sweet child born on a stormy night when even the bravest wouldn't dare to venture outdoors. When labor pains racked Dhool's body, Dilawar, useless and nervous, stayed beside her until the doula shooed him outside. For days he couldn't tear his eyes off the beautiful child who, just like his mother, had clear olive skin and eyes deep as the sea that shone curiously. Then months went by, and he did not prove to be the son of his dreams; he was a child that would never become a man, encapsulated in a time warp, his childhood sealed forever. His disability caused Dilawar's ultimate unraveling.

It was after the birth of their third child, a girl, that Dhool started to observe a change in Dilawar's attitude. If he was indifferent before, his demeanor became increasingly callous. He would disappear for days at end. With the downturn of the fishing industry he filled the void by gambling away the money he obtained from Dhool by threat or abuse. She, who was once his queen in paucity, now became only a means of satisfying his gambling addiction and lust.

His lifestyle carried him many places but hardly ever home. Home was a fortress of refuge for him only at times when his cronies screamed murder at his inability to pay back the money he owed to them. He was a parasite—if he wasn't living off Dhool's hard-earned money, than he was living off his so-called well-wishers. Whenever he was home, which was rare nowadays, he considered himself the primary focal point, almost as if he owned the air inside the four corners of their mud house as well as the occupants, and he expected Dhool to be a slave that tended to his every need. Somewhere in their peculiar mode of life, Dhool felt her heart slowly turn to stone.

Dhool wasn't always an unhappy woman. Most of her village friends remembered her as a carefree, jovial girl who loved singing. The little girl in long jet black pigtails was gifted with an exceptional voice. Her serene voice would rise in perfect pitch and envelop the gorge in its hypnotic tune, the lyrics falling upon Earth like serene

raindrops. Sometimes her voice sounded gentle, sometimes high-pitched; sometimes the notes were light as a butterfly and at other times heavy with unspoken emotions and longing.

Her life was simple; she was one of seven sisters living a modest life near the riverbank, fortunate to have a pukka house unlike the other mud dwellings in the area. Her daily duties included feeding and changing the young ones and helping her mother with the kitchen duties. She cherished her afternoons, when she stole away with her friends to their hideouts, where they organized *gudda-guddi ki shaadi*, mock doll nuptials. She was always the one who sang the wedding songs in her deep elating voice that never ceased to amaze her friends.

“You will be Lata when you grow up,” they told her. “You know, the one who sings in those Indian movies.”

And Dhool would smile. Even at a young age she wasn’t that naïve. She knew that in her world dreams were useless. She also knew that a grain of dust could never reach the sky. She would later think that perhaps she was doomed the day her mother decided to call her Dhool. She would forever be a particle of dust in the vast expanse of the universe. Her dreams could never amount to anything. So why bother dreaming?

Her father was a harried old fisherman who barely made ends meet in the dying fishing industry and was pleased when at the age of fourteen, his eldest daughter was married off to young Dilawar. His only credential that rendered him suitable was that he was a good fisherman.

On Dhool’s wedding day she was garbed in a heavily embroidered ensemble that was a gift from the councilor’s wife. Her daughter’s engagement had broken off, and when she heard there was a wedding in the village, the dress had been sent to Dhool in a desperate attempt to get rid of any and all traces of the failed relationship. The orange crushed fabric was too dark for Dhool’s brown skin, the gold wires of the embroidery on the neck dug deeply into her flesh, the sleeves were too long, the shirt was too wide for her diminutive frame; the councilor’s daughter had been somewhat of generous proportions, yet

Dhool was in high spirits. It wasn't every day that a village girl like her got to wear such bright clothes. Around her neck was a red threaded choker with orange teardrop-shaped stones that her mother had made for her.

What a marriage constituted of, Dhool was unaware. She hadn't been told. It was an area that wasn't ventured into. Her mother hugged her a little too closely when she bid her farewell, trying to pass on her the strength she knew her young daughter would need; Dilawar did not look like a compassionate man, but what could she do. She had six more daughters to worry about.

Dhool thought she knew all about marriage. Why, didn't she marry her dolls every week? She did not imagine that that union would forever silence the little singing *myna* inside her heart.

The initial few days of the marriage were a nightmare.

Dhool was amazed by what was expected of her. She thought it was wrong, even sinful, to be touched so intimately; she flinched every time Dilawar laid a hand on her, and that irked him. On their wedding day, he threw her off the bed in disgust, and slowly and gradually Dhool learned. Sex wasn't something she'd ever enjoy, for she had never been treated gently, and she had never been told otherwise. It was a taboo subject. Even among close friends it wasn't something you talked about. She decided it would be yet another chore in the strange ambiguity of marriage. And then she devised a mode of escape. It was simple, and she was amazed at how well it worked for her.

When he touched her, she marveled at how easily she detached her mind from her body, kind of in a trance. When his lips wandered near her neck, she would be far away from him near the riverbank, singing like a lark in her deep, captivating voice. When his hands reached her navel, it was as if she were in the distance watching the rising sun, in a perfect and soothing surrounding, a green sea of complete serenity. When he crushed her beneath his brawny weight in the throes of passion, she would be inside a river, bathing herself in its glorious blueness, washing away the drudgery of her frugal existence. Her body would writhe and move from the touch mechanically, but

her soul would be nowhere near its casing.

In his moment of manly triumph, he would scream alone, and unbeknownst to him, he was a pitiful spectacle, a victim of circumstances of his own choosing. And then he slept slumped against her body, a dark arm peeled across her chest, like a sad finale to a dismal tale.

The final straw came one day when Dilawar entered the home in a drunken state at dusk. Dhool was putting the little baby to sleep and had just lit the kerosene lamp. Tara was reading by the light. She attended the councilor's daughter's school twice a week in a make-shift class inside the old boathouse that was rarely used those days.

Dilawar sat down on the floor and glanced briefly at Dhool and then looked away. "I have made a decision for Tara," he declared.

"What kind of decision?" Dhool asked. Her eyes narrowed into two anxious slits.

"To get her married off, what else?" Dilawar bellowed. "You are blind. Can't you see how much she has grown? All you do is go out all day, prancing around town, even in Billa's area!"

Tara looked shocked; the book lay forgotten in her lap as she looked at her mother for some form of reassurance. Dhool looked down at her child and hugged her close protectively. She was so little; even her breasts were just tiny buds against her linen shirt. Dhool did not know what angered her more: marrying off an 11-year-old or the "prancing around" statement. She breathed in deeply and responded in a composed voice.

"I am not getting Tara married off. She is not old enough for such responsibilities. She is..."

"She's grown up enough. You don't turn away a good proposal!" Dilawar cut her off impatiently, staring at the duo fiercely.

"There's a proposal?" Dhool responded in shock. "What proposal?"

"Beerbal's," Dilawar said with a scowl.

"Beerbal's?" Dhool was now beside herself with rage. "Beerbal's? Are you insane? The man has probably a decade or so left of his life.

I will not throw my child knowingly into the claws of a dying old man.”

“Quiet, woman.” Dilawar stood up, towering above the distraught woman and the child. “I have given him my promise. The wedding is in a fortnight from today. He has paid good money for this match. He likes Tara and will keep her happy, and when the old goat dies, our little one will live like a princess.”

“Money!” Dhool spat. “So this is what it is all about. How much did you sell my daughter for? Huh? I’ll tell you right now, as long as I’m alive, this won’t happen.”

“It will!” Dilawar moved closer. “Stop me if you can,” he challenged.

Something inside Dhool just snapped, and she inched closer as well, her eyes wild as those of a tigress. Before Dilawar knew what was happening, Dhool started raining him with powerful blows that threw him off balance and then began kicking him toward the door. He fell down on his knees and shielded his head from the onslaught, but he was no match for this woman whose wrath he had invoked. Inside, the commotion had awakened Paryal, and he gleefully joined his mother in what he thought was a game, pelting his father with his little fists and helping push him out the door. Over Dhool’s shoulders, Dilawar’s eyes met Tara’s in despair, but she looked away, elated with a newfound sense of hope.

Dhool closed the door behind Dilawar fiercely and faced her children. “From now on in this house we will do what I say! And I say your baba is gone forever. He is to never to come back in here, ever, do you hear?”

From that day onward Paryal became Dhool’s constant aide, and she took him to work regularly. Her routine became more aggressive. The fight with Dilawar had given her a newly discovered strength, and she started venturing into Billa’s area more frequently and more daringly. There were those who warned her to stay away, who said that Billa was getting aggravated by her behavior, that he had vowed to catch her. Billa was known to be merciless, but this didn’t deter Dhool

in the slightest. She thought as long as her little spindly legged savior was by her side, no harm could come to her.

And so she hid in dark corners and scavenged ruthlessly, her children's love her driving force, and it was on one such day that she came dangerously close to being caught. She was hiding in a deserted warehouse waiting for Billa to make his rounds on the other end of the street so she could speed out in that time and complete her work stealthily. She was crouching near the entrance, and from the slit in the door, she saw him get up from his perch. Quick as lightning, she dashed out. When someone grabbed her hand, she turned around in shock. The man outside was a decoy, and Billa stood there laughing at her.

"Ha! I caught you finally!" He grinned devilishly. At that precise moment, Paryal rushed up to him and bit his hand, which was tightened around Dhool's wrist. Billa let go in pain and grabbed hold of Paryal by the waist, lifting him off the ground in rage. As Paryal's feet left the center of his gravity, he screamed and started banging on Billa's head, causing Billa to let him go to escape the onslaught. Dhool grabbed hold of Paryal's hand and rushed outside but not before Billa had taken a lascivious look at her translucent skin and her mystifyingly defined features, the nose that was just a little too narrow but charmingly so, the mouth that was generous like two voluptuous unplucked petals, the eyes that blazed with an unspoken mission. It touched him in ways that could only be described as a vicious lust.

"There will be a next time," he yelled behind his fleeing prisoners and laughed. "Next time you won't be this lucky."

The scuffle with Billa had scared Dhool, and for days she didn't venture outside. She was surprised that Dilawar hadn't shown up either, although on some nights she thought she saw his silhouetted frame against the coconut tree in the distance, a lonely crestfallen figure. Dhool longed for a man to come to her aid at this junction in life, but her husband's presence meant sacrificing her daughter's life, and that she could never do. She'd much rather kill herself. When Dhool finally did go out, she stuck to the safer routes, avoiding Billa's

area, and left home early to avoid any contact with people. She never took Paryal on those routes again. He was terrified for days after that fearful exchange with Billa, and Dhool had no intention of putting him through another incident like that. On a cold December morning she mustered enough courage to go into Billa's area again because of her dire need: money for some books for Tara, shoes for Paryal that he had worn into the ground, a blanket for the baby, and food to feed four hungry mouths. The trader had reduced the amount he usually paid Dhool for her normal scavenge and promised to increase the amount if she would bring more scraps.

But as it were, she wasn't that lucky. Not only was Billa on her trail, but also his anger was compounded by a lustful longing for her, and together the combination had turned him into a monster, hell-bent on just one and one thing alone—to get hold of the beautiful woman with olive skin called Dhool who so dangerously wandered into his area where even the bravest feared to tread.

Tara looked out the window and bit her nail in anxiety. Where was Ma, she wondered for the umpteenth time? It had started to grow dark, and Dhool always came to her safe haven before sunset. The children had cried themselves to sleep. Tara had fed them some old pieces of chapatti soaked in water, which they had gobbled down, but it wasn't enough to satisfy their hunger.

Across the horizon, the sky had taken on an ominous red hue that had spread all across the sky in a splattered mess. The sun was but a pinched, tired disk that had lost its fight with the eve.

Tara caught sight of two figures approaching the house. When they came nearer, she clapped a hand to her mouth in horror.

It was her father and, wobbling just a little behind him, the bent frame of Beerbal! There was no mistaking his identity even through the *sehra*, the ceremonial headgear of flowers and shimmering strands of golden thread that defined his state of being a groom.

He flicked it away from his face and smiled toothlessly at her.

Dhool got up and looked around in daze. She had been lying, shaken and wounded, on a slab of concrete behind the dumpster in the filthy parking lot of the old paper mill for the past few hours. Her predator was long gone, inflicting upon her the kind of punishment that had mutilated her spirit or whatever was left of it. Somewhere in the vicious encounter of the night before, she had lost one slipper and torn another. The sidewalk was cold beneath her bare feet, her chador thin against her dejected frame. There were welts on her face that had caused her lips to swell. Her clothes were torn in many places, some of which were caked with her own blood.

A group of youngsters standing under a *paan* shop awning snickered at her disheveled state and stuck out outstretched hands to feel her up as she passed by. For once she didn't resist. She went along toward where her home was as if in a trance.

Even before she reached her mud hut she heard the melancholy song that reached out to her. It had pain and suffering embalmed in it although the syllables itself were unfamiliar, the words unknown, but the voice familiar. The rise and fall of the notes had desperation in them, and Dhool started running toward her home breathlessly. The door was wide open, and at the threshold stood Paryal, his eyes shut in the rapture of the song he was singing.

Dhool's chador slipped off her shoulder and fell to the ground as she pushed past Paryal. Tara was nowhere in sight, She looked sorrowfully at her two younger daughters before coming outside and slumping against the mud house, a dejected figure. In sheer emotional ache, she pressed her body against the wall and then grazed her open palms against the entire length of it, feeling the sinewy grains rip open her skin. She cried as her skin bled in camaraderie to her broken spirit.

Was she the victim of her circumstances or merely a fallen survivor? She wasn't certain. She felt a gentle hand cover her with her fallen chador, and she looked up into Paryal's kind but lost eyes. He understood her pain in more ways than she could possibly imagine. Silently she gathered him in her arms and matched his untrained voice with her own lilting one. How much she loved her brood and how differently she loved them now that there were only three.

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