**‘The Smile Snatchers a tale of stolen smiles**

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A few have been decently framed dissenting voices in the parliamentary history of Pakistan. Senator Mian Raza Rabbani is one of them. His last tenure as chairman Senate imprinted his politically enriched futuristic approach and intellectual contribution to strengthening federalism in Pakistan. He drafted the most significant 18th Amendment in the Constitution of Pakistan to ensure more powers to the provinces. The Amendment has played a crucial role in the long-demanded autonomy on different subjects though the Amendment has also been strongly criticized for many reasons.

Over the years, he has also proved to be a man of letters. Two years ago, Rabbani published a collection of his short stories, ‘Invisible People’ that received the Best Fiction Award (2017) from the Pakistan Academy of Letters and The ParveenShakir Trust. The ‘Invisible People’ highlighted the miseries of the children of the working class, the plight of rural women and the jobless poor who keep drifting about in our society unnoticed. His other two books are on geopolitical and other hardcore issues.

Towards the end of the last year, Senator Mian Raza Rabbani’s another work of fiction, ‘The Smile Snatchers’ was launched. The 94-page novella that focuses on the mysterious events that unfold in the life of a struggling artist Zaheer – the main character of the novella, has taken its space in the global arena of South Asian literature. Very well received by the international readers and the literary critics, the novella at a broader level deals with the plight of children in conflict areas and how the international establishment, for its own vested and security interests, has brought suffering to these children and snatched away their smiles.

Artist Zaheer has always been captivated by the smiles of children. One day, the suffering children of the world begin to visit him in his dreams and visions, trying to warn him of a calamity looming on the horizon. The recurring nightmares make Zaheer fear that he is losing his sanity. However, the artist tries to help the children in the only way he knows: through his canvases. He is convinced that the unhappiness of these children is a threat to the future of humanity.

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This is a tale of stolen smiles and the power of art, as Zaheer takes up the challenge. His thoughts go frequently to the refugee children of Mosul’s holocaust, children who have lost their lives in airstrikes in Syria, a three-year-old child whose body was washed ashore after a refugee boat capsized, Afghan children whose limbs had to be amputated, the suffering children of Indian Occupied Kashmir and even Pakistan’s young victims of violence and terrorism.

Zaheer uses his brush to paint smiles on the faces of these children but then realizes that the children he painted were traumatised and not smiling. His journey of trying to spread awareness of the plight of a generation that is the future of the world brings the wrath of the state upon him, as he is arrested while his exhibition is taking place.

Senator Mian Rabbani is known for being an acclaimed and principled democrat and parliamentarian. But his fiction also proved his command over literature. He had tried to dig out truth and present it before the people through literature.

In his own words, “From the beginning, my life revolves around a triangle within me, a politician, mystic and writer, but politician won as romance of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s political dreams to change society inspired me and after Bhutto’s assassination Benazir Bhutto became torchbearer of revolution but romance of idealism began to fade when she was assassinated and then the writer within me pushed me to choose this path for expression.”

‘The Smile Snatchers’ is the story that revolves around children who suffered due to wars around the world that is being termed as an excellent effort to explain that art and politics were not separate as it defined the political lines and reality of the society. The emotions flow with the truth captivating the readers to stick to the charms of the stories woven from real life anecdotes.

Senator Farhatullah Babar believes that it was sad that being a practical politician Mr Rabbani had to choose fiction to express his feelings after seeing that the Constitution and democracy were not taken seriously. The novella is about human rights, resistance and right to expression and the sufferings of children across the globe. Perhaps, it is a sequence of his previous work of fiction ‘Invisible People’. When freedom of speech was suspended artists played their role and informed people about the plights and sufferings through their art that is, however, in danger too.

Rabbani’s credentials as an acclaimed, principled democrat and parliamentarian are well established and are acknowledged by all and sundry including even his political adversaries. There are several instances when he differed with certain policies and decisions of his own PPP but he has not said it goodbye. For this reason, he had declined several offers of induction in the federal cabinet during the previous PPP tenure.

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