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The Square Peg

Khwaja Shahid Hosain

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THE SQUARE PEG, a dramatic exercise in verse

KHWAJA SHAHID HOSAIN

PROLOGUE

(The curtain rises on a darkened stage. Through the darkness the voice of the Narrator speaks.)

NARRATOR:

When nature and society combine
To spawn a misfit, then the Fates achieve
A microscopic malevolence. The atom
Of the individual splits and cataclysmic
Agony is born.
If, then, from the corrosive flow of time,
One agony is wrenched, one torment rescued
And fixed in brave perspective, man achieves
A momentary martyrdom, a flickering deification
That shouts defiance to the heavens.
Pause, then, and mourn awhile
The never-ending strife of little men
Pursuing petty lives to sordid ends.
(Silence, broken by the sound of an infant crying. A spotlight comes on Left, revealing a cradle with three women grouped around it. They speak in an antiphonal semi-chorus.)

**First Woman:**
He breathes . . .

**Second Woman:**
He moves . . .

**Third Woman:**
So sweet and plump . . .

**First Woman:**
Divine . . .

**Second Woman:**
Pure . . .

**Third Woman:**
A joy to see . . .

**All (speaking together):**
Mother's darling . . .
Father's pride . . .
The Lord be praised . . .

**Third Woman:**
Call for the happy father; let him rejoice,
New purpose fills his life, for new life blesses
And sanctifies the home with pride and love.

(As she speaks, a spotlight comes on Right and grows slowly to full intensity, revealing the Father sitting at a table with an empty bottle before him. When she finishes speaking, there is silence: suddenly, as though a string had been cut, his head falls forward on his hands. Both spotlights vanish and through the darkness the Narrator speaks again.)

**Narrator:**
The idle whisperings of three crones
This painful miracle adorn,
In grief and rage the father moans,—
And unto him a child is born.

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**Khwaja Shahid Hosain**
PLOT

(Light begins to grow upon the stage. The scene is the living room of a house which suggests respectability fighting a pathetic battle with poverty. The Narrator continues speaking through this.)

NARRATOR:

Nurtured in sorrow and in pain,
The infant grows to man’s estate,
The time is near when he will gain
His legacy of woe and hate.

(The Father has entered and seated himself Left; the Mother is laying the table, her back towards her husband.)

FATHER:

Is he home yet?

MOTHER (without turning):

No. Eight hours now. (Pause)
I hope—

FATHER (interrupting her):

Never hope. Accept despair,
Clasp fear to you with hoops of misery,
But cast out hope. Its eager canker spreads
The most potent of all poisons—disillusion.
Hope died when he was born,
A certain victim to the ceaseless will.

MOTHER (turning on him):

He was never son to you—never more
Than a convenient peg on which to hang
The sickly fancies of your prisoned mind.
If you were able to, you would project
Your wretched failure into his young life.

FATHER:

In the slow winter of our dying years,
Must anger be the only flame which warms us?

MOTHER (drawing closer):

Oh, my love—

THE SQUARE PEG
Father: Love is for poets and other charlatans;  
But we were closer once,  
When the hot, gusty winds of passion  
Fanned life into a blaze of ecstasy.  
Let us remember, and be silent.

(A long, memory-laden silence is shattered by the slam of a door. The son enters—young, restless, resentful.)

Mother (adoring):  
My son . . .

Father (eager, his cynicism forgotten):  
What news, my boy? (His question dies away into silence.)

The Man:  
They meet you,  
They smile their honeyed, calculating smiles  
And calibrate you with ingenious eyes.  
And then, with exquisite grace,  
They crucify your hopes and bow you out.

Mother:  
Patience is all we need. A boy like you  
Will not go unemployed for ever.

The Man (savagely):  
Patience is dead, mother,  
Butchered on the doorstep of your timidities.  
(He sees he has hurt her; gently.)  
I have myself to blame;  
Their sanctimonious probings  
Tempt me to anger—and to truth.

Father: You young idiot!  
Did you tell them—

The Man:  
All, father. All about the bodies  
Parceled with murderous precision  
In dripping locker-rooms throughout the town.  
All about the women  
Ravished for all eternity and a day
Pale and silent in lime-lined tubs.
All about the factories
Gutted by my incendiary breath
One sultry summer evening.
And they all stood up and cheered,
And shook my hand, and pointed—
To the door.

FATHER:
And so,
In the grip of this self-posturing madness,
You told them the truth?

THE MAN:
Yes, father, and in their electronic minds
This flimsy little truth grew hugely, and overpowered
All other truths.

FATHER:
Will you never learn
The ordinary, fallible, erring ways
Of all us little men? Accept the shackles
Of mediocrity, or you will come
To a sad end, my son.

THE MAN (quietly):
No, father, I prefer to be
Victorious in defeat.

FATHER:
Poor fool.
The dancing shadows of his own defiance
Have made him mad.

(To the mother)
Pray, my dear, that he will learn
The healing liturgy of life.
The sacramental verities
Of the neat collar and the careful smile
May yet be revealed to him.

(The mother is crying. The light on the stage begins to dim as the voice of the Narrator starts, continuing as the stage relapses into total darkness.)
NARRATOR:

What guilty secret shadows his youthful life?
What truth besieges him
With failure and frustration? Details are unimportant,
The fact remains, and axes at the strength
Of his pride and rebellion. Rival attractions
Drag his identity to dissolution.

COUNTERPLOT

(Towards the end of this speech, music is heard, swelling to a frenetic cacophony. It is harsh, insistent, its monotonous beat pallidly aping the vitality of primitive chants. A spotlight knifes through the gloom, picking out a woman whose attempt at looking seductive is a tawdry failure.)

THE WOMAN (singing):

The night was dark,
The moon above,
Lit up the park,
With silvery love.

VOICES:

One more won’t harm you . . .
Give us another, then . . .
Silly, they never put the lights on here . . .

THE WOMAN (singing):

The spring is sweet,
My lips are near,
Come to my street,
And taste them dear.

(She moves into a crowd of dimly-lit figures as she sings, the spotlight moving with her. She catches someone and pulls him into the pool of light. It is the Man, and his shamefaced resistance weakens as she sways close to him, still singing her banal little ditty.)

THE WOMAN (singing):
Though moons may fade
From skies above,
Be not afraid,
I'm near, my love.

(The stage slowly darkens, and her voice fades away.)

NARRATOR: Desire grows from this compulsive meeting
And cataracts them into furtive passion.
The transitory glow of stolen lust
Casts its brief spell, unsanctified
And unchained by covenant.
Then the swift death, pronounced by all
The Fates that wait on domesticity.

EPILOGUE

(A room which evidently constitutes the entire house for its occupants. The woman enters, followed by the Man.)

THE MAN:
A small man with a strange, suspicious mind.

THE WOMAN:
Your boss.

THE MAN:
My colleague . . .

THE WOMAN (wearily):
Your boss.

THE MAN:
A horrid, vacant word. No man can tell me
To order my life in his manner, to move
In ruts worn weary by the chariot—wheels
Of blind observance.
Your love strengthens me, and demands—

THE WOMAN:
That you apologize, and pay the bills,
And bring the groceries, and buy the dress
You promised me six months ago.

THE SQUARE PEG
THE MAN:
My love clothes you in peerless panoply.

THE WOMAN:
Your love does not pay debts. Go spout your dreams
To your drunk cronies, and they will nod their heads,
And slap your back, and crown you emperor
Of dreaming nitwits.

THE MAN:
All right, I will. Stay, then, and drench your thoughts
With misery and foreboding. Dream your dark dreams,
But cast no shadow on my happiness. (He goes.)

THE WOMAN:
Happiness . . .

(Silence. She loiters over to the radio, switches it on, and music blares into the room.)

VOICE (singing):
The Spring is sweet,
My lips are near,
Come to my street,
And taste them dear.

(The woman stands still, gazing stupidly at the radio. The lights fade—so, a little later, does the music.)

NARRATOR:
The wheel has come full cycle. Pause, and ponder
On the remorseless flux of circumstance.
No epic passions here, no Grecian grief,
No obvious woe to captivate the mind.
And wrench the heart. But agony is there—
Immortal, illimitable, insatiable torment,
Ordained and executed with dispatch
And a wry humor, by the smiling Fates. (Pause.)
Thus endeth the First Lesson.

CURTAIN