

Cold Wave

K.A. Abbas

KHWAJA AHMAD ABBAS (1914-1987), a noted progressive bilingual (English, Urdu) writer, journalist, filmmaker and critic, is known for his radical views on life in his short stories and novels. He wrote the scripts of some of the widely acclaimed films such as *Awara*, *Shree 420*, *Mera Nam Joker* and *Munna* the first songless film in India. His works depict the Indian political scene during the nineteen twenties and thirties. Nationalism, leftism, denunciation of fascism, untouchability and Gandhian values are major concerns in his works. A committed journalist, Abbas remained the editor of the popular weekly, the *Blitz* for 30 years. His collections of Short stories include *Rice and other stories* (1947), *Cages of Freedom and other Stories* (1947), *One Thousand Nights on a Bed of Stones and other Stories* (1957) and the *Black Sun and Other Stories* (1963). His important novels are *Tomorrow is Ours: A Novel of the India of Today* (1943) and *Inquilab : A Novel of the Indian Revolution* (1955). In addition to *Barrister At- Law: a Play About the Early life of Mahatma Gandhi* (1947), Abbas has written two autobiographies- *I Write as I feel* (1948), and *I Am not an Island* (1976):



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1 In the dense fog, thought Baldeo, the lights of Connaught Place are like yellow leprous sores on the dark face of night. Then he became aware of a tremulous litany that was barely audible above the silky swish of the cold night breeze.

2 An old beggar, huddled in a corner with his bundle of rags, was whining in the mendicant's familiar monotone. "This accursed cold is killing me, *baba*. Give a blanket to a helpless old man, *baba*. May Bhagwan bless you and your children, *baba*." And because he was blind he did not know that Connaught Place lay deserted in the cold and foggy night like a doomed, dead city. There was not a soul to be seen

moving about anywhere. The sightless old wretch had heard a rustling sound and hopefully concluded that it was a charitable pedestrian, but it was only an old newspaper crumpled into a ball and blown by the wind through the stone-fagged arcade.

3 Baldeo caught hold of it with a desperate fling of his arm, hoping that the sheet of paper might serve as a shield against the inexorable chill. He had read somewhere that in cold Northern countries the poor folk use old newspapers to wrap around their bodies under their flimsy shirts. Maybe that night he would do the same. But when he unrolled the ball of paper he found it was riddled with windows gaping through every column where someone had neatly cut out bits of news or advertisements. A sieve, he bitterly reflected, cannot serve as a shield! Then idly he turned over the paper in the pale glimmer of the fog-bound street lamp. It was only two days old, and one of the surviving headlines declared:

4 COLD WAVE TAKES HEAVY TOLL, WILL HIT DELHI TOMORROW.

5 "NEW DELHI, Friday: North India continues to be swept by a cold wave and reports of more deaths are pouring in from all over the region. In many places the temperature has plunged below freezing point. Within the next twenty-four hours Delhi will also be in the grip of a severe cold wave which is travelling down from the snow-bound heights of Simla. Apart from the hundreds who have been frozen to death, many cases of pneumonia due to exposure have been reported..."

6 Baldeo did not need to read any further. He could write an even more exhaustive and poetic report on the current cold wave. The fog was like an icy shroud thrown over the capital. Every morning one could see thin layers of frost over the ponds and the tanks. With minimum temperature touching freezing point, people were sleeping under as many as three blankets and a heavy cotton-padded quilt. But the deadliest of all, mused Baldeo, is the breeze blowing down from Simla side. He never knew that it could be cold like ice, sharp like a razor blade, and vacuously, devilishly, omniscient and omnipresent. For the homeless there was no escape from it. Wherever you tried to hide, it searched you out in every corner behind every wall, across every threshold. It found you then, like a probing icy lancet it went through your shirt, through your very skin and slashed at your very bones.

7 I should write some verses about the cold wave, thought Baldeo. May be a *ghazal* in one of the shorter metres of Ghalib. If he died of exposure (and there was now every chance that he would) at least his poetry would live after him. But it seemed that in such a cold wave not only blood in one's veins gets congealed, but the very source of inspiration, the grey matter in the brain, is frozen into a block of unfeeling ice.

8 If the temperature keeps falling during the night (he thought) and this breeze straight from an icy hell does not slacken, then soon all my senses, my memory and my mind,

would be stricken by a cold paralysis. I must do something. I must speak something. At least keep on muttering like that poor old man, huddled in the corner.

9 But, no, I am a poet, an educated, cultured, sensitive young man, not a blind old beggar that I should be whining in a voice like the moaning of a street cur stricken with asthma. But, may be, my voice too is like the moaning of the asthmatic cur. May be, if I speak, my words too would come out whining and trembling with cold. I *must* say something, just to make sure the cold has not atrophied my vocal chords.

10 So he said, "Old father, whom are you asking for alms? There is not a soul here for miles – except me." Now he felt that his teeth were chattering and his voice, too, was like a moan. And he who was blind did not see, he could not see, that the one who spoke to him out of the eternal dark night, was an obviously well-to-do young man in silk shirt and woollen trousers. The beggar sensed the proximity of a rival claimant for whatever alms might be had that night. What chance had he, with his sightless eyes, against this one who obviously could see and therefore more successfully pursue the would-be alms-giver? So he picked up his bamboo staff and his bundles of rags and, groping his way with the end of his stick, he went clattering down the crescent-shaped arcade till the night swallowed him up.

11 Suddenly Baldeo was struck by the sense of loneliness which was no less vicious than the bite of the freezing wind. Loneliness, too, he thought, is a kind of chill. Or, maybe, cold is itself a kind of loneliness. When you are alone, without friend or beloved, no one to talk to, to share your thoughts and feelings, when there is no rush and bustle of the crowded market-place, then that solitude, too, has in it the freezing touch of doom. Some people believed that apart from the flaming hell where the sinners would be burnt, there would be another kind of hell too, where the sinners would be laid naked on blocks of ice. And even worse was the third kind of hell where every sinner would have to live in solitary confinement. And to Baldeo at that moment it appeared that his own private hell combined both the tortures of cold and of loneliness. His body already shivering with cold was shot through with the sudden realization that he was alone in a cold, unfriendly, unfeeling world.

12 I must do something, he thought, or this cold - and this solitude - will drive me crazy. I must speak something but there is no one to speak to. I must at least think something. Otherwise my idle brain will freeze and then crack, just as the thin layer of frost frozen on the surface of a pond breaks at the slightest touch of the morning breeze. In a little while I may lose my senses and even forget who I am, where I am, and why I am what I am.

13 Who am I? What am I? I am Baldeo Raj Sharma. I don't believe in castes and creeds, but since birth I am stamped a Brahmin. I am a graduate (Literature and

Political Science) from Meerut College. My father earns four or five thousand rupees a month from legal practice. Before Independence he was known as Raj Bahadur Ranbir Raj Sharma. B.A., L.L.B, Advocate, High Court. Now he is only called Pandit Ranbir Raj Sharma. But I am not just the son of my father. I am also something and someone in my own rights. I am five feet ten inches tall and I have an athletic figure. People say I am quite handsome. My friends even believe that I have a better personality than some of the Bombay film stars. My professors have more than once testified to my intelligence and my literary flair. True that I got only second class in B.A. but that was because I spent so much time in extra-curricular activities, debates, tennis tournaments, amateur dramatics, and *mushaira*. I am regarded as a promising young poet with the pseudonym of Nirmal. In *mushairas* they call me Janab Nirmal Meeruti, in *kavi sammelans* I am known as Pandit Nirmalji. They say that my Urdu *ghazals* and Hindi *geet* are marked by an intimate and urgent sense of passion which is not to be found in any other young poet.

- 14 Where am I? And why am I where I am? Why am I not in my father's bungalow where even at this moment the fire-place in my bed-room must be lighted, waiting for me? In the double-spring bed there must be a pile of soft blankets and silken *lihaaf* padded with three seers of the finest cotton-wool. Under the pillow must be lying my silken sleeping suit and my embroidered *pashmina* dressing gown which I had bought in Srinagar last year. In the book-shelves, also waiting for me, must be all those fine editions of the world's great poets – Milton and Byron, Kalidasa and Ghalib. And hidden behind these books - that half-empty bottle of brandy.
- 15 I am not in my cosy bedroom. I am not even in the draughty boudoir of Radha where at this very moment there must be singing and dancing -and drinking! All the gay young gallants of Meerut must be there – all expect me! And Radha, perhaps, must be singing one of my own *ghazals* or *thumrees*!
- 16 Radha! Radha whom I loved with such devastating intensity that I left my house for her sake. My father threatened to disown me but I did not care. I left the house, just as I was sitting there in a garden chair on the lawn, I did not stop even to put on a sweater or a jacket. My mother cried aloud to stop me but I did not pay any attention to her. I hardly heard her pleading and her wailing, in my ears resounded only the magical jangle of Radha's anklet-bells. I had decided to prove that a poet not only talks about love, he also experiences it and can sacrifice anything in the world for it. Romeo and Juliet, Laila and Majnun, Charudatta and Vasantsena. These are only legendary lovers, figments of forgotten fables. But Nirmal and Radha, Radha and Nirmal - we would become a living legend of love in our own times!

- 17 And so I had walked out of my father's house and, just as I was, only in my shirt and trousers, walked through the bazaars to Radha's first-floor flat with its professional balcony overlooking the street. At that moment I was not at all conscious of the cold weather. The afternoon sun was pleasant and wann, in my veins was the hot blood of youth, and my heart was aflame with the fever of love. I was sure (because she had often assured me) that Radha too was consumed by the same fire of love, and that she would do anything for me.
- 18 Seated in front of her dressing-table, with a glowing brazier by her side, she was drying her long silken hair after a bath. The fire in the brazier had cast a warm pink glow on her wheat-brown face and to me it looked like a face illuminated by the inner fire of love. I thought that any one who was lucky to have her love could never complain of cold weather or of the chills of a hostile world.
- 19 "Come, come, Nirmalji," she greeted me with a professional smile, but as she looked up at me I saw the unmistakable glow of love in those big black eyes of hers.
- 20 "Radha," I blurted out without any introduction, "I have left my house for ever ..."
- 21 "Left your house?" she asked incredulously, "But why?"
- 22 "Because of you. Father has threatened to disown me because I said I would marry no one but you. Come, we will go to Delhi this very minute and get married there..."
- 23 "And if you are disowned by your father, how shall we manage to live?"
- 24 "I will get some job. If you like you can sing for the radio."
- 25 "Oh, what a simpleton you are, Nirmalji. Don't you know, no professional singing-girl is allowed to sing for the Government's sacrosanct radio? Go, my dear, ask for your father's pardon. Why do you kick the goddess of wealth that resides in your house?"
- 26 "Because I love you more than all the riches of the world, Radha!" I grew lyrical, eloquent, in the expression of my passion. "I will work as a teacher, as a clerk - I will do anything - but I will not go back to the house where I cannot keep you as my wife."
- 27 "Then do what you like, Babuji." There was cold-sting in that formal "Babuji" - as if suddenly I had become a total stranger to her. In a voice that was colder than ice and sharper than the sharpest sword-blade, she said, "I have no desire to be the heroine of this Laila-Majnun drama." Finally she dismissed me without even a pretence of politeness. "Go, Babuji, I have to get dressed. Soon it will be the hour of my business."
- 28 As I came down the narrow stairs, the evening shadows had settled over the bazaar. A cool breeze was rustling through the tree-tops in the park. I felt a sudden shiver passing through my body. Now I remembered that I was wearing nothing over my silken shirt.

- 29 All this happened yesterday. Hardly thirty hours have passed since then. From Meerut to Delhi, I have travelled only twenty-five miles. But in these thirty hours and twenty-five miles the world has changed for me. Yesterday I was a careless rich young man, heir to property worth a million, I was a well-known and even popular figure in my town. Fathers used to cite my shining example to their sons. Every mother was not only willing but eager to marry off her daughter to me. Several college girls made no secret of their romantic interest in me. And today I am jobless, homeless, vagrant on the streets, seeking shelter from the freezing cold wave behind a column in one of the curving arcades of Connaught Place. The stones under me are cold, I can't stop my teeth from chattering, and I have a fearful feeling that my mind is undergoing a slow process of paralysis.
- 30 Am I proud or am I obstinate? Am I suffering for an ideal or for a foolish, boyish whim? If I had gone back and fallen at my father's feet, surely he would have forgiven me. Now I would be costily wrapped up in my dressing gown, seated near the fire-place sipping brandy. But more than the heat of the fire-place I am in search of the warmth of love. More than my body, it is at least inadequately covered with an under-vest and shirt, but in the last thirty hours my soul has been stripped of all the illusions which were its only protective coverings. Now it is stark naked in the 'cold wave' that no meteorologist can ever predict or describe.
- 31 I did not want to remain in Meerut and cause a public scandal about my leaving my home and so I took the train to Delhi. I spent the night in the crowded Third Class waiting-hall which looked - and stank - like a battle-field strewn with corpses. The stench from the latrine swept in with the draught every time someone went in or came out. And yet after an hour of shivering in the train, the waiting-hall was a haven of refuge. Lying on a torn newspaper (which I had picked up from the dustbin) spread on the hard tiled floor, it was not easy to sleep. But, I consoled myself, at least I am safe from the biting cold. Suddenly it occurred to me that in such a big waiting-hall there was not even a fire-place or heater. The pleasant warmth which I was now experiencing emanated from the mass of the people sprawled there on the floor. I sombrely reflected that if I had been alone in that vast, draughty hall I would have perished of exposure in the night and only my frozen corpse would have been discovered in the morning. Those two or three hundred people - rough-hewn peasants from the villages, shriveiled-up clerks, hawkers, railway workers, beggars and mendicants - who lay there huddled against each other in all the contortions of their sleeping postures, had saved my life. But then I too had contributed to each of them the warmth of my own body. Weren't we all involved in each other's survival? For a long time I lay awake pondering over the significance of that phenomenon, wondering what great truth lay

- hidden there in that mass of snoring humanity. Then a distant gong sounded the hour of five, a railway engine shunted along rattling the whole station building, and a railway *babu* shouted aloud: "Eh, you get, up, all of you, and clear out of the waiting hall. It's not your darling auntie's mansion!" And as a group of sweepers appeared with brooms and pails and mops, the sleepers awoke and scrambled to get together their scattered belongings. I came out in the open where it was still dark and cold, and the rows of street lamps were being switched off, one by one.
- 32 I went to call on several of my friends. Ram Dayal, who was my class-fellow and whose father has a big cloth shop in Chandni Chowk, was very happy to see me and immediately suggested that we go to see a new film that was opening that day. But when I told him that I had left home and was looking for a job, all the warmth seemed to be drained out of his voice. "All right", he said quickly, as if anxious to dismiss me before I could ask him for a loan, "See me the day after tomorrow. Today I'm rather busy. My father doesn't let me out of the shop for a second."
- 33 When I came out of his house and walked through Chandni Chowk, I saw that the sky was overcast with grey clouds and bare, autumn-stricken trees were trembling in the cold breeze blowing through the municipal park.
- 34 Then I went to Amjad whose father has a shoe factory. They were about to sit down to breakfast and insisted on my joining them. I did full justice to the *parathas* dripping with *ghee*, spicy *kababs*, dried fruit, carrot *halwa*, and had three cups of steaming tea. But when I explained to Amjad the circumstances in which I had left home, and asked him to lend me a hundred rupees he replied in a tone that was soft like ice cream and just as cold. "So sorry, Baldeo, I'm rather hard up right now. Abba is very strict with cash, you know. But if you want two rupees..."
- 35 I got up and as I walked out through their garden I saw that all the roses had wilted and withered in the cold winter night.
- 36 From old Delhi I walked to New Delhi to Gurbachan Singh's bungalow. His father is Deputy Secretary in one of the Ministries. He was not in the same college with me but I had met him during a tennis tournament and together we had won in the Men's Doubles. Since then we were very good friend, calling each other "Partner." But he was not at home. His father told me that Gurbachan had gone to the club to play a game of tennis. So I trudged along to the club and found him in the card room playing rummy. "Hellow, partner," he shouted as he saw me, "what will you have to drink?"
- 37 I declined the drink and called him out. When I told him the situation he said, "Sorry, old boy, but you know how hard it is to land a good job these days. I will

seriously advise you to go back him. If you need the fare to Meerut I can lend it to you."

38 "No, thanks, Gurbachan," I said and walked out. He went back to the Card Room.

39 As I came out of the club gate, it began to drizzle. The ice cold drops of rain stung me through the shirt.

40 A cab-driver hailed me. "Taxi, Babu Saheb?"

41 "Yes," I answered, trying to sound casual and nonchalant.

42 "Where to?"

43 "Meerut."

44 So far! It will cost you fifty rupees."

45 "That's nothing. But it's Saturday and the banks close early today."

46 As I moved away I heard the taxi-driver telling someone behind my back. "I knew people go crazy in summer, but this is the first one I have seen losing his head in a cold wave."

47 Then I went to the Employment Exchange, I went to several offices, I tried for a job even in some shops. But there was no job for a young, healthy graduate. As the day dissolved in the shadows of the evening and the temperature fell steeply, one by one all the illusions were peeled off my soul. Now it is past midnight, Connaught Place is desolate as the icy wind from Simla softly swishes through the arcades. They say in the papers the cold wave is imminent. I can feel it in my bones that it has arrived already. They say there will be an epidemic of influenza and cases of pneumonia. I feel a choking pain rising in my chest. I and my soul stand alone, naked, shivering in the desolation of the cold night. Is there such a thing as pneumonia of the soul? I wonder

...

48 "Babu!"

49 A rough-edged but thin voice broke upon the solitude of Baldeo's thoughts. He tired round and saw the outline of a woman, presumably a beggar, shivering in her rags, huddles behind the next column of the arcade.

50 "Babu, have you got the *machis*?"

51 Baldeo felt the useless match-box in his pocket – the packet of cigarettes had long since been exhausted – and threw it to the woman behind the fat round pillar.

52 The match was struck, a little flame leapt up in the murky darkness and the beggar woman's face flowed in the flickering circle of light. Pitch-black complexion. Layers of dust and dirt on the unwashed face. Unkempt matted hair. Baldeo shivered at the impact of her ugliness, and thought of escaping from her neighbourhood by seeking shelter in some other arcade.

- 53 The pin-point of fire at the glowing end of the *bidi* seemed to have imparted the warmth of life to the beggar woman. Baldeo saw that she was no longer shivering. Blowing out a thin streak of smoke she said. "Father O father, how cold it is! Will you smoke a *bidi*, Babu?"
- 54 Baldeo wanted to refuse - he had no desire to strike up any kind of intimacy with the filthy woman in rags - but divining his hesitation she added quickly. "It's only a matter of exchange, Babu. Your machis, my *bidi*, take it." She threw the packet of *bidis* at him and slid across the verandah floor to his side. "Here, light up your *bidi*." A black, calloused hand brought the little flame to his lips. As the match lighted up their faces she was aghast to see the smooth-faced, silk-shirted "Babu". How could such a person have strayed out into her cold and ugly world? He, too, now had a closer look at her face. Beneath the layers of dirt the black face seemed to glow with a hidden fire like red-hot embers under a pile of ashes. The small and beady black eyes, too, had in them a flaming invitation. There was the yeast of youth in her bosom and from her body rose a pungent odour which was compounded of dirt and sweat and poverty and youth and passion.
- 55 They looked at each other for one brief, flickering moment till the match burnt out to the end singing the woman's finger. She dropped the match, and suddenly both of them were plunged in a pool of darkness. Baldeo felt the caress of a hot, quick breath on his face. The next moment the match was struck again and Baldeo lighted his *bidi*.
- 56 Now they squatted in the verandah, reclining against their respective columns. Their *bidis* were like two tiny stars in a dark, dark sky, beckoningly glowing at each other across the black vastness of the night.
- 57 As he puffed at his *bidi* Baldeo felt that his hand was trembling. He touched his forehead. It was burning with fever. He inhaled a long deep puff of smoke and a steak of pain went slashing against his inside. Pneumonia? He shivered with the cold premonition of death.
- 58 "Babu!"
- 59 "Hoon?"
- 60 "Feel very cold - yes?"
- 61 "No -" but in that very instant, a sudden gust of wind sought him out and, piercing through his shirt, stabbed him in the heart with a dagger of ice.
- 62 "Babu, you are shivering with cold. Have you fever?"
- 63 "No, it is nothing." But as he said it, he could not stop his teeth from chattering.
- 64 "Babu, this cold is deadly. You may catch *namooniya*."

- 65 "Let it be!" he said hoarsely, for now the noose of ice was choking and strangling him. His will, his consciousness, his very life was slowly, inexorably, helplessly, drifting towards an inevitable doom. With difficulty he gasped out, "It's all over now."
- 66 "No Babu, no." In her voice was a cry of anguish, a plea for life, a challenge and an invitation, "Come here, Babu. Come to me."
- 67 He forced his eyes open, saw the woman in torn sari who was muffled in some rags.
- 68 "But you have no blanket, either?"
- 69 "There is no blanket, Babu. But there is me?"
- 70 The fever burnt in his brain. His breath was being choked out of him. He was no longer able to understand the subtlety of passion. But as a fierce cold blast crept his spine, there was a tumultuous roar in his brain. Voices rang out across the horizon of his hallucination. Cold Wave! Cold Wave!! Cold Wave!!!
- 71 Beware, beware! The Cold Wave is coming. In its wake will come Influenza, Pneumonia, Death!
- 72 Cold Wave! Cold Wave!! Cold Wave!!! ... it was like the warning of doom, but soon it was drowned in a symphony of snoring in all the nasal notes of a million human beings huddled together in a vast, world-sized Third Class Waiting Hall. In this new symphony there was warmth, not freezing cold, there was the breach of life, not choking death. Baldeo felt himself sinking, sinking, into a soft and warm and fragrant depths of a body saturated with the life-giving warmth of love. Now he was no longer afraid of the coldest Cold Wave!

Let's Think and Do

1. Comment on the title of the story.
2. Write a paragraph in about 100 words on the impact of growing commercialism / materialism on human relation.
3. 'A friend in need is a friend indeed. Comment on Baldeo's friends in the light of this statement.
4. 'I went to several offices, I tried for a job even in shops. But there was no job for a young healthy graduate.' Write a short essay on the job opportunity in your state/ country.
5. Baldeo, a young poet, leaves his palatial home, in favour of Radha's love; but Radha refuses to accompany him, saying, 'I have no desire to be the heroine of this Laila Majnun....' Comment on the love relationship between Baldeo and Radha.
6. Write a newspaper report on the onset of cold wave in your city locality.