

Patna Blues

Praise for *Patna Blues*

‘Abdullah Khan manages to bring together a heartfelt simplicity in his prose style with delicate personal and cultural observation and humour. His writing is lit with a love for the world.’

– **Amit Chaudhuri**

‘Reading *Patna Blues* is like pedalling your way through a little-known India. It is certain to fill you with inexplicably candid and absolutely stunning tales. *Patna Blues* marks an impressive debut and brings us an important voice.’ – **Anees Salim**

‘[A] stunning debut novel . . . sometimes hilarious and at others, heartbreaking . . . *Patna Blues* is a successor of the tradition of Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Ruskin Bond.’

– ***Business Standard***

‘A heartbreaking, engrossing read.’ – **Scroll**

‘An important novel and a timely one . . . *Patna Blues* heralds the arrival of a powerful new voice.’ – **Rakhshanda Jalil, *Friday Times***

‘An unputdownable saga of life.’ – ***Hindu Businessline***

Patna Blues

Abdullah Khan

 juggernaut

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*To Dadi, Late Amirunnisa,
and Amma, Late Shaheeda Khatoon,
from whom I inherited the art of storytelling*

*Aur bhi dukh hain zamaane mein mohabbat ke siva
Rahatein aur bhi hain vasl ki rahat ke siva*

(There are many other sorrows in this world
Besides the agony of love
There are many pleasures in the world
Besides the joy of one's union with the beloved)

Faiz Ahmad Faiz

Dream

ONE

Arif shivered when a gust of wind hit him. *I should have worn a jacket*, he thought as he stopped his bicycle in front of a two-storeyed yellow building. He had just returned home from college. Parking his bicycle in the stairwell of the building, he pulled a notebook from its carrier and climbed up a flight of stairs. The banister of the staircase was broken in places and cobwebs hung from the ceiling.

On the first floor, Arif pushed open a door and entered the balcony of his family's flat. He placed his notebook on a tangerine wooden chair. Next to the chair was a cheap grey-coloured three-seater rexine sofa. Arif bent to remove his black leather shoes. Holding them in his hands, he clapped them together to free them of the mud. Placing the shoes in the corner next to the entrance, he rubbed his palms to get rid of the dust, picked up his notebook and walked to his bedroom.

Arif was tired and wanted to rest for a while, but he turned back from the door of his room when he saw two strangers there. One of them, a short, stocky boy with closely cropped hair, probably in his early twenties, was sleeping on

his bed, and the other, a pot-bellied, middle-aged, bearded man, was sitting on a chair, and intently going through the latest issue of *India Today*.

Arif went straight to his mother, who was chopping vegetables in the kitchen.

‘Who are these people, Amma?’

‘The old man is a distant cousin of your father’s. He has come to Patna to get his son treated at the Indira Gandhi Institute of Medical Sciences. They will be staying with us for the next four or five days,’ Amma said as she placed the chopped vegetables in a big bowl.

‘Guests again! Is this a house or a serai? Every second day we have guests,’ Arif said, pulling his hair. ‘We have just three rooms and that’s not enough even for the eight of us.’

‘Keep your voice low, beta. They’ll hear us,’ Amma said in a whisper as she washed the chopped eggplants, potatoes and radishes in running water.

‘So what!’ Arif said and stomped out of the kitchen to a tiny room at the end of the corridor.

The storeroom with its three gunnysacks of wheat and rice also held a small bookshelf, a table and chair, to serve as Arif’s backup study. The smell of pesticides from the sacks aggravated Arif’s allergies and made him sneeze. There was no window and he had to keep the door propped open. He could not sit there for too long; the odour was overpowering.

Guests were a perennial problem in his house. Relatives visiting Patna always stayed with them. Who would spend thousands of rupees on lodging when it was available for free? Most of them came for medical treatment, some to participate in mass recruitment of police constables or to

appear for a case at the Patna High Court. Some of their guests were so distantly related that Abba and Amma had never met them before. They came with references, either a letter from his uncles or a call made to Abba's office.

Abba too resented this incessant flow of guests. 'These people think that my house is a dharamshala,' he would say in a fit of anger, once the guests had left. However, while they stayed, he was the perfect host, which probably encouraged them to come again.

Amma was always overburdened with work. At times she cooked for as many as twenty people on the coal chulha. Abba had been trying to buy a gas connection for the last three years. He had applied for a connection the previous year, but his turn had not come. Even a single-cylinder connection was expensive in the black market. Every morning Amma left her bed early to light the chulha. Because of the heavy black smoke that it emitted she took the brick-and-mud chulha to the terrace, filled it with raw coal, lit it there and then brought the lit chulha back to the kitchen. She never woke her children up to help her. Even if her children were awake, she did not allow her daughters to lift the heavy chulhas. 'Carrying weights can affect the menstrual cycle in young girls.' She couldn't come up with an excuse for her sons, so Arif and Zakir did help her on the few days they woke up in time to do so. 'Starting tomorrow, I'll wake up early to help Amma. At least I can help her with the chulha,' Arif had resolved last year, but most mornings Amma would have lit the chulha before Arif woke up.

Arif and Zakir shared a room. The second room had

two small-sized beds placed at a distance from each other where Abba and Amma slept. It also had a plastic table and four chairs and functioned as a drawing room during the day. The third and largest room with a big balcony had a wooden chowki for Dadi. On a double bed all three of his sisters – Rabiya, Nazneen and Huma – managed to fit in. Whenever a male guest arrived, Amma slept on a mat in the corridor and the guest shared the room with Abba.

‘Amma, I’ll sleep in the corridor. You sleep in my room,’ both Arif and Zakir would tell her, but she never agreed. If the number of guests increased, Arif and Zakir had to give up their room as well. Arif didn’t mind giving up his room if it meant Amma wouldn’t sleep on a woven straw mat spread on the floor, with a bundle of clothes made into a pillow. But he felt annoyed about his studies suffering as a result of this.

Arif returned to his room. The bearded man was busy reading a book in Urdu, absent-mindedly scratching his salt-and-pepper beard. The young man was still asleep.

‘Assalam alaikum,’ Arif greeted him.

‘Walaikum assalam rahmatullahe barkatahu,’ replied the bearded man, extending both his hands out to him. Arif reluctantly shook them.

‘Are you Abdul Rashid sahab’s younger son?’ he asked warmly.

‘No, I’m the elder one,’ Arif replied.

‘Oh! But your brother Zakir looks older than you. Mashallah! He has got the physique of real Pathans, he is so tall and fair. How old is he?’ The man continued scratching his beard.

‘Twenty,’ Arif replied. At five feet ten inches, Arif was tall by Indian standards. But Zakir was even taller.

‘And you?’

‘I am a year older than Zakir.’

The man paused for a while and then asked, ‘Isme Sharief, your sacred name please.’ This time he had spoken in sophisticated Urdu, almost in old Lakhnavi style.

‘Arif Khan.’ Arif was already exhausted with the seemingly never-ending questions. He was only too familiar with this routine.

‘Nice name. How are your studies? Are you doing a BA?’

‘B.Sc. Chemistry, Honours, third year,’ Arif said as his eyes scanned his desk.

‘Which college?’

‘A.N. College.’

‘Zakir and your sisters?’

‘Zakir is in his second year, BA, at A.N. College. Rabiya is in J. D. Women’s College. My other two sisters are studying at the Bihar Military Police High School.’

‘Arif babu’ – the bearded man’s tone changed suddenly – ‘if you aren’t busy, would you like to come with us? The city is completely new to me. If it were Motihari, I would have had no problem.’

‘I’m afraid I can’t,’ Arif said. ‘My final examinations are just two weeks away.’ He walked towards his bed and picked up a windcheater from a stainless steel wall hanger next to it.

‘We don’t come visiting every day,’ the man said in a hurt tone.

‘Sorry,’ Arif said as he collected a slim book, a blue diary and a pen from the table and walked out of the room.

Ten minutes later, Arif sat on a green patch of grass in Nehru Park with a blue diary and the *Diwan-e-Momin* lying next to him.

'Instead of studying for my exam, I am here with a poetry book,' Arif muttered to himself. The park was desolate except for a few kids playing on the swings in a distant corner. Flower beds with roses and marigolds flanked the pebbled paths that criss-crossed the park, with a marble bust of Jawaharlal Nehru in the centre.

A gust of wind shook the plants and Arif felt a slight chill. Zipping up his windcheater, Arif picked up the book. He was flipping through the pages when the sound of footsteps distracted him.

An emaciated old man wrapped in a white shawl and a tall, slender woman in a black sari walked slowly in his direction. Her long hair was dishevelled, her eyes swollen and smeared with kohl. She had been crying. Arif couldn't help looking at her.

'Subhanallah!' he murmured and went back to his book as he saw her helping the elderly man settle down on a bench nearby. He opened his diary and couldn't stop himself from scribbling two lines in Urdu about her.

*Syah zulf uska syah paraban uska
Maninde sang-e-marmar hain badan uska
Misal kya doon is husn-e-bemisal ki
Chand se bhi haseen rukh-e-roshan uska*

(Her tresses are black and so are her robes
Her body is like marble

Her beauty is incomparable
Her face more beautiful than a full moon)

‘Babuji, how are you feeling now?’ Arif heard the woman’s voice and raised his gaze again. There was no response from the old man. She held him by his shoulders and looked around, confused and anxious.

‘Babuji! Babuji!’ Her voice became shriller. With one hand, she touched his forehead and cheeks, and then bent her head to place her ear on his chest. She started to shake him frantically.

Clutching his diary and book, Arif got up and rushed to them.

‘Please help!’ she cried, trying to hold back her tears. Arif dropped his things on the bench, grabbed the old man’s wrist and searched for a pulse.

‘Please call an ambulance,’ the woman said, wiping her nose with the back of her palm.

‘It takes ages for an ambulance to arrive in Patna. I’ll get a taxi instead,’ Arif said and hurried towards the telephone in the paan–cigarette shop nearby. The swarthy shopkeeper with a handlebar moustache was all alone, busy clipping the tips of paan leaves. Sharda Sinha sang from a tape recorder, ‘*Le le haiye O piya choliya bangal ke . . .* (O my dear husband, get me a blouse made in Bengal . . .)’

‘Local call,’ Arif said, handing him a two-rupee coin and stepping into the booth to dial the taxi number.

It took almost twenty minutes for the taxi to arrive. Arif asked the driver, Habib, who knew Arif from having ferried

his family every now and then, to help carry the old man to the car. Poking his ear with his little finger, the driver glanced nervously at the old man and the woman in black by his side before saying 'Yes, Arif bhai!'

The woman followed them and extended her arms to support her father's head as they laid the old man on the back seat. She accidentally brushed Arif's chest with her arms. Arif felt a strange sensation run through his body. He kept staring at the woman as she got into the car and placed her father's head in her lap.

'Let's go,' the woman said with urgency.

Shaken out of his stupor and embarrassed for the way he had stared at the woman, he climbed in the front and sat next to the driver.

Turning to Habib, he said, 'Patna Medical College and Hospital, Emergency Ward.'

On the way to the hospital, Arif looked in the rear-view mirror. The elderly man was still unconscious and the woman was rubbing his palms and chest as tears rolled down her rosy cheeks. *Ya Allah, help this old man*, Arif prayed silently.

Near Dak Bunglow Square, the car stopped with a jolt.

The road ahead was blocked. A makeshift barricade had been created in the middle of the road using plastic chairs, bicycles and scooters. Sixty to seventy young men, some of them squatting on the ground, chanted slogans in Hindi:

V.P. Singh Murdabad

Mandal Commission Wapas Lo

Paper and cloth banners were hung on the nearby electric and telephone poles.

*Mandal Commission Will Not be Accepted
Say No to Reservation! Say Yes to Merit
Stop Vote Bank Politics
No Appeasement on the Basis of Caste*

The taxi was blocked by vehicles queued up behind their car and they were unable to take a different route. Arif got out of the taxi and looked around. On a cycle rickshaw, a dhoti-clad middle-aged man with a pencil moustache was discussing the politics of reservation with a short, plump young man on a motorcycle.

‘After twenty-seven per cent reservation for the backward castes, we upper castes will be left with no option but to beg on the streets,’ he said in an agitated voice.

The woman had rolled down the glass and was looking outside distractedly. She didn’t say anything, but her brimming eyes beseeched him to get her father to the hospital somehow.

Unnerved by her tears, Arif desperately wanted to find a way out of there. ‘Habib bhai, we should talk to the students,’ Arif said to the driver.

‘No point, Arif bhai.’ Habib was again poking his ear. He cleared his throat, rolled down the glass, stuck his head out, spat and said, ‘They’ll not let us go.’

I have to face them alone. Arif stole a brief glance at the woman.

‘Should I come with you?’ she asked.

‘Stay with your father. I’ll talk to them,’ Arif said, rubbing his chin with his fingers. He was afraid of facing the protesters because he knew how far a mob of students

could go in a charged situation. Mustering all the courage he had, he exhaled and began to make his way through the crowd to the other side.

‘What’s the problem, mister? Don’t you see the road is blocked?’ One of the protesters, a well-built, bearded man with a red tilak on his forehead, rose from the ground.

‘Sir,’ Arif entreated, ‘an old man is seriously ill. Please allow us to go. He’ll die if he doesn’t get timely medical help.’

‘No, it’s not possible. Go away.’

‘Please, brother. It is a question of life and death,’ Arif implored.

‘When the future of millions of youth is at stake, we don’t care about an old man,’ said a swarthy man in a grey safari suit as he emerged from the crowd.

‘Just go away!’ the bearded man said threateningly.

‘No! I won’t. What you’re doing is illegal,’ Arif began to lose his temper.

Suddenly, a sturdy-looking twenty-something jumped out of the crowd and punched Arif, who fell to the ground.

‘Abey saale, are you here to teach us what is legal and what is illegal? Fuck off or we’ll beat the shit out of you. Bloody rascal.’

Arif knew he couldn’t fight alone with this mob of students.

Other protesters had begun to surround him. And one of them held a hockey stick. There was complete silence.

Arif was frightened and confused. He didn’t know what to do next.

‘Please don’t hurt him,’ a female voice said. Turning around, he was surprised to see the woman in black standing

behind him with her palms folded in request. Her hair was covered with the pallu of her sari and her eyes were brimming with tears.

The bearded man shook his head and told his fellow protesters, 'Let him go.'

The students surrounding Arif stared at him with angry eyes, and then began to move aside indicating that Arif could pass. Rising from the ground, Arif looked intently at the woman. He rubbed the dust off his palms and turned to go when he heard Habib shouting and gesturing frantically towards the car. Arif's heart sank. The woman in black had already started running. Arif followed her.

The old man was muttering something indecipherable. Habib was fanning him with a folded newspaper. Arif heaved a sigh of relief. The woman got into the car, placed her father's head in her lap, started gently rubbing his chest and began reciting the Hanuman Chalisa:

*Pavanatanaya sankata harana mangala murati rupa
Rama lakhana sita sabita hridaya basahu sura bhupa . . .*

(O son of the wind god, one with an auspicious form and the destroyer of adversities. O king of gods! May you dwell in our heart along with Rama, Lakshmana and Sita . . .)

In a few seconds, the old man fell silent. The woman continued with the recitation. Arif looked around to find a way to get away. But there was none.

Barely a few minutes had passed when a white Ambassador car and two anti-riot police buses stopped

on the other side of the road. Thirty to forty policemen emerged from the buses and moved towards the protesters. The helmeted men were armed with lathis. A senior police officer got down from the car and made announcements on a hand-held loudspeaker, asking the students to clear the road.

The students responded by pelting stones at the policemen. Sensing trouble, Arif swiftly got into the taxi. A few stray stones fell on the crowd stuck in the traffic jam. People panicked and many of them left their motorcycles and rickshaws and ran for safety. Those in cars and taxis cowered.

The policemen went after the protesters. Arif saw the students scatter. Some fell on the road and the policemen beat them up mercilessly before dragging them to the police van.

Soon, the road was cleared. Habib sped through the Dak Bunglow Square.

The old man was wheeled inside the hospital on a stretcher and the woman went in with him. Arif stayed to settle the taxi fare. Luckily, he had received his monthly pocket money from his father that morning.

Entering the waiting hall of the Emergency Ward of PMCH, Arif spotted the woman sitting in the waiting room, the loose end of her sari pressed against her mouth, probably trying to control her sobbing.

‘Where is your father?’ Arif asked as he sat down on a chair beside her. The hall smelt of dettol and phenyl. A lanky middle-aged man was wiping the floor with a piece of soggy cloth.

‘They have taken him for some tests,’ the woman said in a low voice. ‘They asked me to wait here.’

She had barely finished her sentence when a sturdy man with a thick moustache came and asked her to accompany him to the ICU. Arif also rose to go with her.

‘Only one person allowed,’ the man said matter-of-factly.

‘Please wait here till I return,’ the woman said to Arif.

‘Okay.’

An hour later, the woman was back. ‘Thank you very much for all your help. You saved my father’s life. It was a heart attack,’ she said, her face shining with gratitude. ‘He is much better now.’

‘I am happy I could be of help,’ Arif said shyly, trying not to look at her face. ‘What’s your name? And where do you study?’ She had used the respectful ‘*aap*’ instead of the informal ‘*tum*’.

‘My name is Arif Khan. I am doing my B.Sc. Honours from A.N. College.’ He thought of asking her name as well but checked himself. It was impolite to ask a woman’s name if she was older than you. ‘You live near Nehru Park?’ Arif asked tentatively.

‘Yes, in Swagat Nagar. But we are planning to move to some other rented accommodation very soon. My husband is a manager at the State Bank of India,’ she replied. ‘I . . .’ she began to say something and then stopped suddenly.

‘Yes?’ Arif asked.

‘I am sorry to bother you again,’ she said hesitantly. ‘Could you do me one last favour? Could you go to Danapur to fetch my cousin? I tried his phone but I couldn’t get through. Tell him Sumitra sent you.’ She held out a scrap of paper. ‘This is his address.’

Sumitra! What a beautiful name. He silently recited her name many times as if it were some kind of hymn.

'I'll go immediately,' Arif said, looking at her face guardedly. She seemed comforted by the fact that her father was doing well. She even smiled while thanking him again and the world's most beautiful dimples appeared in her cheeks.

'Arif, this is for the taxi.' Sumitra held some money in her hand.

'No! No! I have already paid him,' Arif said.

'You are a student. And students are always short of money.' She came closer, gently held his arm and pushed the money into his breast pocket. When her hands touched him, Arif froze. He couldn't breathe during those few blissful moments.

Arif exhaled deeply as he walked out of the hospital. He thought of the moment her hands had touched him and he got goosebumps.

Ashok Raj Path was bursting at the seams as it did on weekdays. The traffic moved at its own leisurely pace. Arif caught a yellow-and-black Bajaj autorickshaw to Gandhi Maidan from where he would change to another autorickshaw going to Danapur.

Two hours later, Arif reached the address. The house was locked. The neighbours didn't have any idea about the whereabouts of Sumitra's cousin or his family. It was eventually ten past five when Arif returned to the hospital, but Sumitra was not there.

'Some relatives of the old man came here and they have

taken him to a private hospital for further treatment,' the woman at the reception informed him.

Arif asked her if they had left any message for him. The receptionist said no. Arif was exhausted and had eaten nothing since morning. He decided to return home, wondering how Sumitra could disappear without leaving him a message. His heart ached with an unusual kind of pain. The thought that he might not see her again saddened him.

Later that night, he wrote a poem. *A Beautiful Lady in Black*.