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In Search of Self: A Review of Fazl Illahi's *The Signs*

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**Reviewed by:
Ibn Afzal**

“There is a fight going on in this world since eternity. And this fight shall continue unabated. And there will be phases of suffering and deliverance for man. Like anyone else, I am a spectator and an actor too. As a spectator I seem to be a victim, as an actor I turn out to be a culprit. Both ways I suffer.” (The Signs)

With writers like Agha Shahid Ali (Poet), Mirza Waheed, Basharat Peer and Shahnaz Bashir taking lead, Kashmir is successfully creating its space in Anglophone Literature. Following the footprints of the authors mentioned many new voices are emerging from the valley. Most of these writers deal with socio-political conflict. Fazl Illahi, currently teaching in the Institute of Advanced Studies in Education (IASE), Srinagar, and the founder cum director of Prof. Bashir Foundation (an NGO), chooses a different track. In his debut novel, *The Signs*, Fazl Illahi deals with spiritual/moral conflict. Saleem, the protagonist and the narrator of the novel stands at crossroads. He is not able to choose a way. On the one hand, there are mundane worries tugging at his sleeve. On the other hand, there are signs that demand his attention. Torn between the pulls of Material and Spiritual worlds, Saleem is not able to share his predicament. There is a continuous tension between Material world represented by Jaffer and the Spiritual world represented by a mysterious mystic by large and Imran in part. Jaffer, unconscious of the signs, is a worldly wise man who knows how to make best of any opportunity. Imran, after meeting the

mystic, changes his course towards truth and faces loss in business. Saleem, conscious about the signs, is caught up between the two. On the one hand, there is Jaffer teaching him the ways of world and the other hand, Imran's transformation impresses him. In choosing either Saleem loses the other.

It is only after a few (first by chance and then forced) meetings with the mysterious mystic that Saleem begins to see things clearly. He finds peace in the application of the mystic's teachings. He realizes the worth of spiritual wealth and happily lets the world go and faces all the suffering with ease. Fazl Illahi has an artistic way of saying; there is providence in the fall of a sparrow. As the mystic once says, "We see a fragment and think it to be the whole reality". Saleem, in the mystic's words, "seems to be at war with providence" for the ordeals he has faced since childhood. But it is only in the course of time that he "know[s] that providence involves great reason" and learns to see things as a whole and find out the good in every loss. He realizes that the day to day happenings are not just random events, but signs. The signs are Nature's way of saying, this is not all; there is something more to it. To decipher the signs is to know the Self. These signs are there for everybody but we often choose to ignore them. Saleem chooses to follow them to the zenith of self-realization where from he has a holistic view.

The novel is a bildungsroman. It is Saleem's journey through anxiety, depression and suffering to self-realization and tranquility. But this realization doesn't come easy. There are forces at every step to pull him down. Influenced by the mystic, once Saleem refuses to accomplice Jaffer in a crime they had mutually planned the circumstances are contrived in such a way that he lands in jail besides losing his job. Like a skiff in a storm Saleem is tossed from one calamity to another. But he does not budge and emerges triumphant to "set sail between and beyond space and time".

The novel is significant for the moral questions it raises. The good seem to suffer and the evil prosper. In pursuit of material wealth human being has lost his moral sense. To him the only god worth worship is Money. His greed has blinded him and his cruelty has crossed limits. The fisherman, who comes to rescue Saleem when he was drowning in the Wulsar along with Anwar, says, "I tried persuading other shikaras but they declined, saying they were busy with their spoils, their fish. They ferry people too for money. No rescue. No losses." People like Jaffer mean only their business and for him "Hell with the children. I am not bothered who lives or

dies.” His sole care is money. With a motto, “bribe and be bribed”, unlike Saleem, he seems to be the master of circumstances. He knows how to manipulate every situation and make the best out of it. Imran, who decides to supply only life saving drugs and save people, loses all his dealers one by one. Doubtless, Saleem suffers the more.

While reading the book I thought it was sermonizing. It is only after finishing it that I realized, actually the book as a whole is a great sermon that needs to be delivered from every pulpit and learned by heart by every listener. In the present world “where money rules everything else”, where “machine has no compassion and man has no morals”, and where we are “increasingly morphing into elaborate gizmos [machines]. Senses morphed into sensors, nerves into wires, organs into devices and language into tones”, it is only Truth and Love that can save us. The mystic says, “*Aeshqin khuur kar---* row love and connect with other shikaras and Wulsars” and “*Pazritch khuur kar---* let truth oar your shikara.” This is the lesson that needs to be learned and taught. This is the way to self-realization. Love invalidates all the boundaries and dissolves the differences, making us one: “Love always had us one, reason tore us into you and me.”

The subject matter of the book is essential though apparently dangerous to deal with especially in a debut novel. But Fazl Illahi has dealt with it very artistically. The action, mostly, takes place within Saleem’s psyche. Using Wulsar, Shikara, and Oar as the major symbols, Fazl Illahi weaves magic in words. The images of Wulsar, Shikara and Oar recur throughout the novel. It won’t be wrong to say that these images are the skeleton of the novel. Saleem’s experiences and thoughts are at the same time personal as well as universal. His philosophical musings, at every step, strike true to heart. His thoughts, short and philosophical, read poetic. At times the demarcation line between literal and symbolic meaning of words disappears.

Besides, the novel doesn’t turn a blind eye to social realities. Events and scenes are keenly observed and vividly described. Taking medical practice as a prototype, the novel laments the loss of professional ethics. Companies supply cheap drugs, doctors prescribe merely for the sake of few bucks, favoritism at clinics, corruption in courts, injustice, innocents wronged and the criminals rewarded with freedom are just a few instances.

All said and done, however, justice is not meted out to Imran. It looks like he has been used as a vehicle, by the author, to facilitate Saleem's meeting with the mystic. He disappears, almost from the middle of the book. We neither see him again nor does Saleem, though he rows love, think/talk about him except for once at the end. The reader is left wondering about his fate.