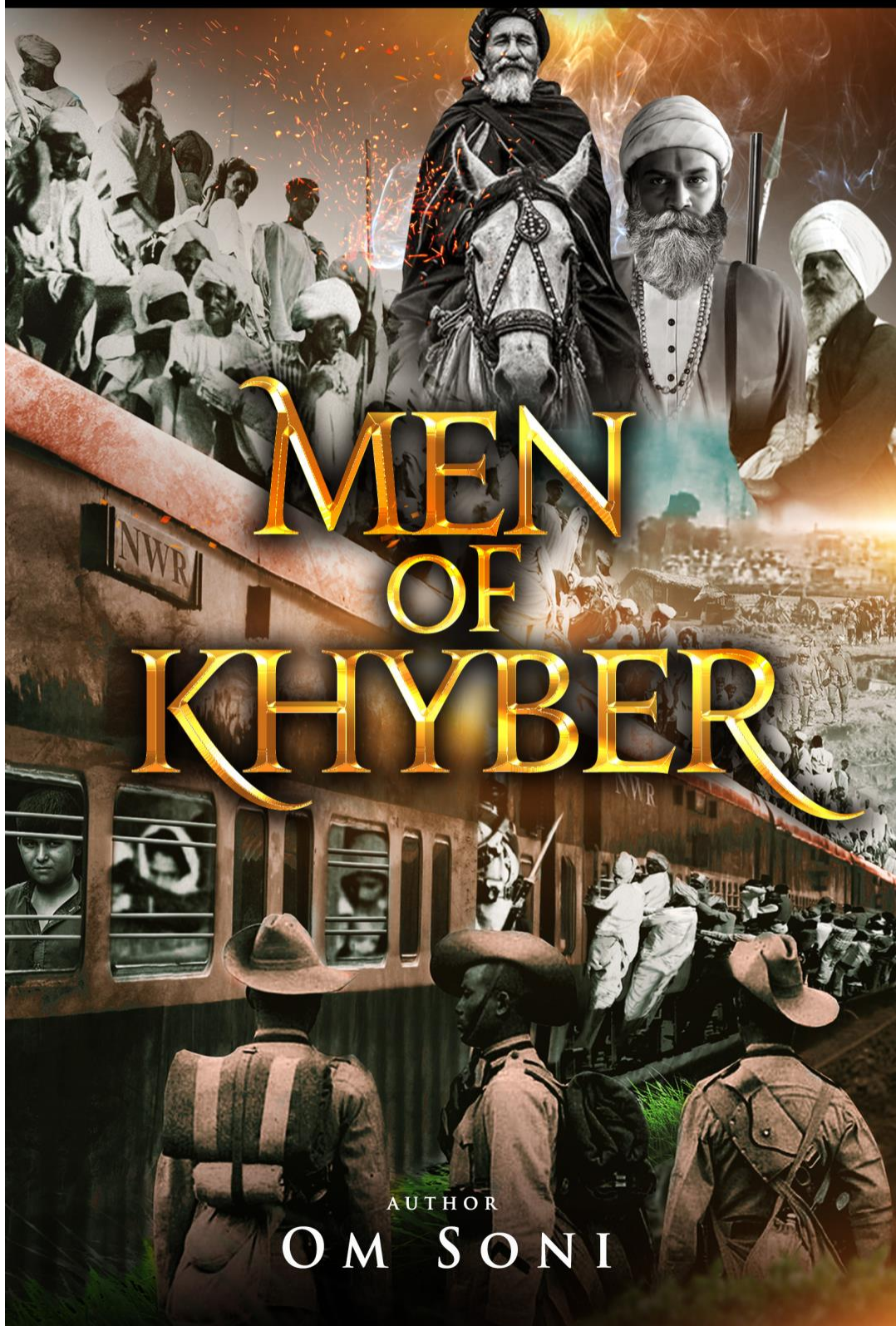


BEFORE YOU TAKE ME AWAY



MEN OF KHYBER

AUTHOR

OM SONI

Prologue

My name is Yama. I am the god of the dead. It is said that I am the first man who experienced death. I am also known as *Kala*, meaning “time,” because time brings people one step closer to death. In most Eastern religions, I have been given the responsibility of helping the dead pass to the next life. While many people expect some sort of judgement after they die, I don’t judge all the dead. I only judge the ones who can’t make a choice for their next life for themselves. Passing judgments on others is a painful part of my job. I rather like to be the one to cheerfully remind people of their departed ancestors.

Death can bring out different emotions in people. Some peacefully pass away to the next life without needing any intervention. Others choose to linger after death, refusing to move on. Many lack the conviction and strength to make a choice. They desire to surrender their right to make their own decisions in death and leave their fate to my judgment.

And I do judge them for their deeds. There is a lot of work involved. Wars, unrest, diseases, and disasters have kept me very busy. Luckily, I have assistants called *Yumdoots*. And let us not forget Chitragupta, my record keeper, as well as my pet dogs and birds. Together, we perform our solemn duty to help the dying transition to the next life.

Most people don’t like to talk about death. They worry about leaving the known and going into the unknown. The fear of being judged for their deeds worries them. Humans, I have noticed, can be very clingy, especially to their bodies and their identity. They are too attached to material things and people they have known and loved. They don’t want to leave their past situations. Because of that, they let their bodies linger in pain; some linger even after they die. But there is no escape from death, and there never will be. Death will remain the ultimate truth.

Death and destruction have haunted humans since the beginning of time. It has especially haunted people of particular areas on Earth. One such area lies between Afghanistan and Pakistan. In recent times, this place has been called Pashtunistan, or the

land of Pashtuns, after the name of the tribes that live there. But the story that I have for you is from before Pakistan was created; before it became a separate country by partitioning from India in 1947. During this story's time, the areas of Pashtunistan lies between Afghanistan and India.

From the times of Alexander the Great to Ashoka the Great, until the Soviet occupation and Taliban control, the mountains and valleys of Pashtunistan have seen significant death and destruction. Now infamous for the Taliban and Islamic terrorists, that area was not always like that. People of the land respected freedom of thought and different ways of worship; they favored discourse and discussion over beheadings and bombs. They listened to new ideas and philosophies even when they disagreed, and embraced ideas of their own free will.

Before recent times, this land flourished with culture and trade. Those were great times for this land; different cultures lived and thrived together. There once was a pure alliance between Hindu-Sikh and Pashtun clans who fought together to protect freedom of thought and defeat bigotry and hate. The fighters of these clans were spread over the lands and mountains of Pashtunistan. The story of this clan is special to me because there was a boy in that clan that negotiated his time of death with me. He was not afraid of death. He just wanted to get a few things done before I took him away. But before I tell you more about the story of the clan and this boy, you should know a bit about the city where they lived.

This clan was centered in the beautiful and lively city of Pashtunistan. They called it Peshawar, meaning a "frontier city." For almost two millennia, Peshawar was the frontier town for ancient kingdoms of India, including the Mauryan Empire and the Gupta Empire. It was a trading hub—a place for traders to rest and enjoy their time before moving on to their destination. Since the times of Ashoka the Great, warriors roamed these lands and mountains, guarding the Hindu Kush Range and Khyber Pass, protecting their country from foreign invaders. Later, Kushans spread the influence of Buddhism in the area and built beautiful monasteries. But their lands were overrun by White Huns from Central Asia, who destroyed the thriving city and most of the Buddhist monasteries

in the region. Soon came the onslaught of Islamic invaders, who destroyed remaining monasteries and temples, converting their people to Islam by force and killing those who resisted.

The warrior clans fought hard to protect their country and culture. Even though they lost, they didn't give up. Eventually, the Marathas and Sikhs among them turned the tides against the invaders and raised their flags on Peshawar. As rulers and reigns changed, some of their warriors stayed behind and adopted Peshawar as their home. Some even settled in the mountains and lived peacefully with Pashtuns. But the peace of Pashtun lands was destroyed by Islamists who came from distant lands.

When Sikhs took over the city in 1831, they pursued the Islamists in the mountains. And there, the Islamists hid, influencing the Pashtun tribes against infidels, encouraging hate and violence against other religions, and destroying the peaceful co-existence Pashtuns had with other cultures. Then, a man named Syed Ahmad came from the East and introduced *jihad* to the people of Pashtunistan. Although Sikhs defeated Syed Ahmad and his men, they could not defeat his ideology. The violent *jihad* he preached continues to destroy the lives of Pashtuns and others to this day. Even for me, it is painful to see so many young men destroying theirs and others lives for nothing. In death, I only see bitterness and guilt on their face.

When the Sikhs lost Peshawar to the British, many of their warrior clans settled in Peshawar and the mountains of Swat. One such clan was led by Kalyan Dil. After losing the battle with the British, Kalyan left with his people for the Upper Swat mountains to seek help and refuge with his friends among the Kalasha people. On his way towards the town of Chitral, his caravan ran into hostile Afridi tribes. Kalyan and his militia fought hard. His wife, Raye Devi, fought bravely and killed many Afridi fighters but was killed in the battle. Kalyan lost both his sons and was left for dead. As Dils lay there dying on the cold, snowy mountains, I saw peace and satisfaction on their face of a battle fought hard and a life lived with dignity and pride. There was no fear of death tormenting their souls. As if they always knew not only about the certainty of death but also the uncertainty of its time.

As much as Kalyan wanted me to take him away with his wife and sons, it was not his time. He was saved by the Kalasha people. There, Kalyan married a Kalasha woman and rebuilt his clan, eventually settling in the town of Tarnab. The Dil clan thrived in Pashtun lands for three generations until the British decided to divide India in June of 1947. The partition of India created the Muslim-only country of Pakistan, while India remained a country for every religion. Peshawar and all properties of the Dil family were now on the Pakistani side of the border.

Provoked by mullahs and politicians, Muslims in Khyber went on to eliminate the “infidels” from their lands. But Dils would not leave their homes for India. After they died, defending their pride, they lingered in Peshawar, refusing to pass to the next life. I still see them today in Qissa Khwani Bazaar and in their mansion, Dil Mahal. They tell me they will linger till the reign of terror and bigotry ends on their lands. They will only pass to the next life when tolerance and freedom of thought return. Their presence reminds me of the glory of the frontier city and the clans who defended the people and cultures of ancient India.

Book Description

Jawar Dil is the influential and charismatic leader of a powerful Hindu clan in Khyber. His skill in maintaining peace and harmony between many different factions and amidst the complex relationships that abound in the region are legendary, but after the death of his beloved wife he decides to retreat from public life and live as a spiritual recluse in Jalalabad.

With the clan now left dependent on Jawar's untested son, Jai, it isn't long before radical elements emerge to take advantage. Encouraged by Jai's inexperience, Arfan, a Mullah with a lust for power provokes conflicts between Muslim warlords and the Hindu tribes, aided by his grandson, Ali.

It isn't long before Jai is completely cut off and out of his depth and is unable to deal with the escalating conflict. With the rising death toll of his people, Jawar returns with his brother Jurnail and their childhood friend, Dostan, to defeat their enemies.

But there are greater problems looming. As the political situation in India hangs on a knife edge and Muslims are calling for their own country, Arfan and Ali use it as a pretext to return and continue their war against the Dils.

Do the Dils have the power to defeat them again and see peace returned to their lands? Will the clan heed Jai's advice and relocate to a place where they will be safe? Or will their desire to live and die in the lands they were born in be too strong to overcome?

About Author

Om Soni is an author and entrepreneur who was born in Punjab, India and who now lives in Detroit, MI with his wife, son, and their dog.

Through his books, he strives to deliver the facts, deliciously wrapped in exciting fiction that is hard to put down or ignore. And through them he intends to continue to put forth the history and ideas that are buried by those who have an agenda to mislead.

With an interest in history, culture and religion, Om enjoys traveling whenever he can. *Men of Khyber* is his first work of historical fiction.

<https://linktr.ee/omsoni>

Where to buy the Men of Khyber

Book is available on Amazon and is free for Kindle Unlimited subscribers for next few months.

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B09Q7YRX1P>

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