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From Kandhla to Canada, an Engrossing Life in Journalism

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A world tour of eras spanning pre-Partition to post-9/11, through the eyes of a pioneering Indian Muslim journalist in a leading Canadian paper.

As a title for a memoir by a brown Muslim journalist who has had a long career in North America, *Unapologetic* beggars belief. Can someone with that identity remain unapologetic in their expression and yet thrive in this part of the world? After all, the most well-known journalist from the South Asian stable here has been Fareed Zakaria, and *unapologetic* isn't a word anyone would ascribe to him. So, in that respect, Haroon Siddiqui truly surprises. As you move through the pages and become more aware of the positions he has taken throughout his career, you can't help but admire his moral grit. It takes nerves of steel to author a piece titled 'It's the U.S. Foreign Policy, Stupid' a week after 9/11.

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Unapologetic spans the rich life of Siddiqui, remarkable in its sweep, and despite bearing witness to a great many things, still exuding love for most, including the two countries he calls home: India and Canada. It is also an interesting life, which can be crunched into eminently readable anchor stories for Indian newspapers. I would imagine some like these: *Kandhla's son shines in faraway land, awarded Canada's highest civilian honour*; *Once a volunteer imam in Hyderabad, now the edit page chief of Toronto Star*; *This champion of multiculturalism in Canada has roots in small-town UP*. And if somebody ever made a film on the book, Siddiqui and his brother riding a Vespa on a dusty road and bumping into a herd of goats, a day before his marriage, could make for a lovely opening scene.

The book's initial chapters trace the religious and scholarly traditions of Siddiqui's family, train journeys in pre-independent India, Partition and its personal cost, the invasion of Hyderabad by Indian forces, and his love for mangoes and *kaleji* and cricket. The book also explores much of the Muslim clergy's fierce opposition to British rule and partition, the debates within, the Muslim anxieties in post-independent India, and notably, Maulana Madani's (Darul Uloom Deoband's rector) call to Indian Muslims to "faithful citizenship and Islamic practice" in a free India. These are critical bits of our history and any reminders of them are welcome in these times. When sense and sensibility make a comeback in the country, this history will inform conversations and collective imaginations again.

There are cockle-warming tales about family and friends in the book, losses, old-world camaraderie, and a more evolved way of life wherein people worked and ate and slept, without worrying about their portfolio investments and retirement funds. There are details of Siddiqui's professional journey, starting with what is almost a rite of passage for several Indian journalists-failing at pre-medical and pre-engineering tests. Before he takes the flight to Canada, he does a stint for the Press Trust of India, also doing cricket commentaries occasionally. In Canada, he makes his bones at *Brandon Sun*, a newspaper in Manitoba, the polar bear capital of the world, before moving on to the bigger, more popular *Toronto Star*, and rising through the ranks to become the Editorial Page Editor in 1991. Years of work as a wordsmith certainly shine through the facile prose of his book.

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As a journalist with *Toronto Star*, he travels places far and wide, covering events ranging from the Iranian revolution to the American war in Afghanistan, and appropriately crediting the mainstream media's deep pockets in those days for that privilege. The book is abundant in its critique not just of the West but also the western press, more specifically the latter's reportage on West Asia. American-ally Reza Pahlavi's torture and brutal repression of his people found little coverage in the West, Siddiqui notes. Similar seemed to be the case with Saddam Hussein's use of chemical weapons while he was being backed by the US. "Foreign reporting in the West had mostly been war propaganda [...] The enemy, usually non-white, made a juicy target - the more crudely portrayed the better. Non-war reporting wasn't much better. It consisted of Orientalist exotica-the sultan's harem, the belly dancer's pelvis," writes Siddiqui, pulling no

punches.

The Palestinian exception in the Western liberalism also finds a much-needed mention: "Too many free-speech crusaders are complicit in stifling criticism of Israel, labelling it hate speech and anti-Semitic, as demonstrated during the recent Israeli genocide in Gaza." (His former employer, *Toronto Star*, is a known offender though when it comes to coverage of the Israel-Palestine issue, at least since October 2023. *The Breach* analysed over 2,000 sentences relating to deaths in the *Toronto Star*'s coverage between 7 October, and 24 November 2023 and found that the paper had used the term "slaughter" for Israeli deaths 28 times but not even once for Palestinian deaths.) To be writing about the West's crimes without equivocation, Siddiqui must have ploughed a lonely furrow in the 80s and the 90s. Understandably, he doffs his hat to his publisher, John Honderich, for giving him the freedom to write what he wanted, "A writer is a nobody without a platform and without institutional protection."

During his time as the editorial page chief of Canada's largest newspaper, Siddiqui invited columns from people across persuasions and ethnicities, and shaping public discourse from that very important position. As a columnist later, he became a prominent voice for multiculturalism, in a country where it had become a defining value. It is truly remarkable, as he points out, that no overtly anti-immigrant party can succeed in Canada. Even as he extols polite Canada's plural ethos, he also draws attention towards the country's dark history of violence and cultural genocide against the indigenous peoples of the land. Siddiqui's own multiple identities, those of an immigrant, a South Asian, and a Muslim, helped him observe and opine. He kept the flag flying high, even in the dire straits of the post 9/11 world, refusing to apologise for his religion or identity despite the enormous pressures and broadsides.

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There is, however, one aspect of the book that makes me a little impatient-it's the adulatory framing within which he has mentioned Brahmins at a few places. While discussing the ownership of *The Hindu* newspaper, he describes the Kasturis as "the venerable Brahmin family." At another place, he is recounting the time when his English professor recommended him to the journalism department, "... Abba had full confidence in this Brahmin suggesting admission into a faculty headed by another Brahmin …". Why would one write about a social class in rather flattering terms, when that class is a function of an extremely rigid and oppressive social structure? Would Siddiqui have used the expression "the venerable White family"?

There's more on that note and it comes up when he is discussing the matrimonial traditions of the family. He says the alliances would usually take place within the extended family, and when the family ventured out, it would only be "among a tight circle of friends and acquaintances who shared their piety, *adaab* (etiquette) and *akhlaaq* (manners, behaviour, ethics)." These are interesting terms. It's not difficult to see that these are muted markers of class, and caste. That these traditions are mentioned so matter-of-factly, unsubjected to any ethical rigour, is a little disappointing.

There is more literature on caste among Muslims now than existed a few decades ago. I am sure Siddiqui could benefit from reading that and reflect again on parts of his life with a fresh perspective. People would love to read that, I am positive.

Other than that, his book makes for a mostly enjoyable read. It takes you around the world and eras, enriching you in a way that meeting an old friend in a distant land does. It would feel personal to some, possibly interesting to others. And maybe, all of us could apologise for our faiths and identities a little less after reading this book.

Salik Ahmad is a Toronto-based commentator.