

Dinner with the Dead: A Ghost Story is a supernatural romance by Shahzad Rizvi that captures the timelessness and trials of love. Sami Ullah is a modern Indian man, successful, charismatic and a hard worker: "Sam was no ordinary executive; his rise to fame had been meteoric..." Despite this, Sami cannot find happiness and goes through life feeling as though he is missing something. "His mother was always looking for a girl for him. But every girl she proposed, every girl that was shown to him...fell far short of the radiant ideal he had in his heart..." Sam feels detached and lost because he has forgotten his past, his connection with where he came from.

Sam's dreams have been haunted by visions of an old mansion. When he finds it at last, however, falling down with neglect, his first encounter is fraught with spooky occurrences. He is confronted by an old man who tries to drive him away, a cobra whose bite punctures his tire, and a white owl that "swooped from the eaves of the mansion and circled over the car, hooting eerily." In some parts of India, the owl is considered bad luck and the bringer of death. However in others parts of the nation white owls are associated with the goddess Lakshmi and are symbols of good fortune. This white owl, as it happens, is a ghost in disguise – the ghost of Kiran, Sam's love in his previous life that centered around the mansion 150 years earlier.

Kiran, in the 19th century, was a penniless orphan servant in Sam's wealthy household. Sam, then known as Rahi, loves Kiran, but their love is doomed by the radical disparity in their backgrounds. Rahi, unfortunately, catches the eye of Princess Andaz, who is selfish, cruel, and even murderous. She terrifies everyone with her temper: "Your Highness," says a servant to his royal master, "The princess is very upset. She shot a servant and missed. That has made her even more furious." She is fat and unattractive, outward manifestation of the ugliness inside her.

When Rahi refuses to marry Andaz, his father furiously assaults and nearly kills him. Kiran saves his life, nursing him back to health. Meanwhile, Andaz and her parents commit an unspeakable atrocity on a small British outpost. Kiran and Rahi, temporarily sheltered in a royal refuge that turns out to have been stolen from its indigenous inhabitants in a hideous act of betrayal, dream of escaping somewhere where they can be together in peace, but the forces arrayed against them are closing in. They are separated as they attempt escape, and only learn the truth about each other's fate when they reunite in the 21st century. But there is evidently no refuge there, either. How Kiran saves their love is the charming and deeply romantic resolution of the story. "You remember that night when you told me we could elope? Go somewhere far away? The only solution was to go to elope to some *time* far away."

The story contains incidents of horror, including several acts of cruelty and betrayal, and elements of humor, including a cowardly pandit and a vain policeman who might make a reader think of Dickens. There are also supernatural elements of the story, including a magical old man who dwells in a tree who confers an act of grace upon Kiran and Rahi in their hour of need.

Acts of selfishness are contrasted with acts of sacrifice and courage. Whereas Princess Andaz is coddled and revered, Kiran is an Untouchable, “from the lowest caste.” Yet it is the so called Untouchable who acts with the most humanity, while the Princess murders in cold blood. The status one is born to, the author seems to argue, has nothing to do with one’s character and capabilities, and in fact the highest-status members of society may be capable of causing the most damage.

Weaving together the 21st and 19th centuries, Rizvi creates a colorful tapestry of India, filled with romance, cruelty, mysticism, and hope. Like all his novels, *Dinner with the Dead: A Ghost Story* is dedicated to his wife and reads, “For my Becky, for the ages.” His dedication perfectly captures the premise of the novel: that love is timeless.

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