

Amrita Pritam

Jnanpith laureate

WINNER OF INDIA'S MOST PRESTIGIOUS LITERARY AWARD



Pinjar

THE SKELETON

AND OTHER STORIES

tara press

Pinjar

The Skeleton and other stories

Amrita Pritam

Translated and Adapted by
KHUSHWANT SINGH

Tara press

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Amrita Pritam August 31, 1919 – October 31, 2005 A TRIBUTE

In her writing career spanning over six decades, Amrita wrote with words dipped in blood. Her work is a story unforgettable. She wrote from the heart.

Some of her works brought her fame for which she was honoured with the Sahitya Akademi award and the Bharatiya Jnanpith award (the highest Indian honour for Literature). But it was the simplicity of her style and the purity of her thoughts that she stayed a writer for the common person on the streets.

Brought together in this volume are two of the most moving novels by one of India's greatest women writers. The Skeleton, set against the background of religious and clan feuds on the eve of Partition.

The Skeleton, translated from Punjabi into English by Khushwant Singh, is memorable for its lyrical style and the depth in her writing. Amrita Pritam portrays the inmost being of the novel's complex characters.

That Man is a compelling account of a young man born under strange circumstances and abandoned at the altar of God.

Amrita Pritam, recipient of the Jnanpith Award - India's most prestigious literary prize, for her work Kagaz Te Canvas (Punjabi), Sahitya Akademi Award, Padma Shri and many other such honours, wrote for the common people in Punjabi and was known for her simplicity and purity of thought. Where she wrote the acclaimed and laurels winning Pinjar or the Raseedi Tikat, she also wrote the thrilling Doctor Dev, Kore Kaagaz (blank pages) and Unchaas Din (49 days).

Essentially a poet, she has several novels and collections of short stories to her credit and in total penned 28 novels, 18 anthologies of prose, five short stories and 16 miscellaneous prose volumes. Much of her writing has been translated into English, Hindi and some European languages.

Soon, you will see most of her works in this imprint (Tara Press) within the next two-three years and we hope you will enjoy her writings as much as we have enjoyed collecting them for you.

Anuj Bahri (Publisher)

In this Collection

Pinjar (the Skeleton)

That Man

*Aj aakhan Waris Shah nun,
kiron kabraan vichchon bol,
Te aj kitab-e-ishq daa koi agla varka phol*

*Ik roi si dhi Punjab di,
tun likh likh maare vaen,
Aj lakhaan dhian rondian, tainun Waris Shah nun kaehn*

*Uth dardmadaan dia dardia,
uth takk apna Punjab
Aj bele lashaan bichhiaan
te lahu di bhari Chenab*



*Today, I call Waris Shah,
“Speak from your grave”
And turn today,
the book of love’s next affectionate page*

*once, a daughter of Punjab cried
and you wrote a wailing saga
Today, a million daughters, cry to you,
Waris Shah Rise!*

*O’ narrator of the grieving; rise! look
at your Punjab Today,
fields are lined with corpses,
and blood fills the Chenab.*



Pinjar (The Skeleton)

THE SKY WAS colourless grey. Pooro sat on her haunches with a sack spread beneath her feet. She was shelling peas. She pressed open a pod and pushed out the row of peas with her finger. A slimy little slug stuck to her thumb. She felt as if she had stepped into a cesspool; she clenched her teeth and flicked off the slug and rubbed her hands between her knees.

Pooro stared at the three heaps in front of her; the empty husks, the pods, and the peas she had shelled. She put her hand on her heart and continued to look vacantly into space. She felt as if her body was a peapod inside which she carried a slimy, white caterpillar. Her body was unclean. If only she could take the worm out of her womb and fling it away! Pick it out with her nails as if it were a thorn! Pluck it off as if it were a maggot or a leech ...!

Pooro stared at the blank wall facing her. Memories of the days past came crowding into her mind.

Pooro belonged to a family of money-lenders of Chitto village. Although they had given up money-lending for some generations, they continued to be described as sahu-kars. They had seen bad days and at one time been compelled to sell their kitchen utensils on which the names of their forefathers were engraved. Pooro's father and uncle could not bear any more disgrace. They left the village and went to Thailand. There the wheel of fortune turned in their favour. At that time Pooro was a little girl of nine. Besides her, there was a baby boy still in his mother's arms. Then her father came back, cleared the mortgage on the house (the capital and compound interest were more than the price of a new house) and saved his ancestral home from attachment by creditors and so wiped off the disgrace. He sold whatever grain and fodder he had raised on his land and returned to Thailand. But this time he left behind a home the family could call its own and a name it could be proud of. When he returned to the village the next time, Pooro was fourteen years old. There was also her younger brother and three succeeding him, three younger sisters. Her mother was expecting her sixth child.

The first thing Pooro's parents did on their return to Chitto was to find a young man – the son of a well-to-do family in the neighbouring village, Rattoval – for the hand of their daughter. Pooro's mother only awaited the birth of her own new baby. As soon as she had had her ritual bath, she planned to arrange her daughter's wedding. Pooro's parents were resolved to lighten themselves of the burden of a daughter.

Pooro's fiancé was both handsome and intelligent. His parents owned the only house in the village which had a penthouse of solid bricks; it had the word Om inscribed on the balcony. They also owned three buffaloes. Pooro's father presented the boy's parents with five silver rupees and a piece of sugar candy and so "booked" him for his daughter. In those days it was customary amongst the Hindus of the region to make matrimonial exchanges, so despite the fact that Pooro's brother was barely twelve he was engaged to her fiancé's sister, who was a small child.

Pooro's mother had had three daughters in succession with only two years between them. She had had enough daughters, and now that fortune was smiling on them once again and they had plenty to eat and sufficient to wear, she wished that her next child should be another son. She had offered prayers to the Holy Mother. The women of the village brought cowdung and made an idol in her courtyard. They covered the head of the idol with a bright, red veil bordered with gold, and pinned a tiny gold nose stud in its nostril. All of them changed in chorus.

Holy Mother, be cross when you come!

Holy Mother, be happy when you go!

The village folk believed that it was the Holy Mother who determined the sex of a new-born child. If she was gay and full of laughter, it implied that she was on good terms with her husband. In that case, she would quickly make a girl-child and rush back to her spouse. On the other hand, if she were in a sullen mood, it implied that she had quarreled with her husband and would be in no hurry to get back to him. She would then stay a long time and patiently make the child into a boy. The women repeated their chant:

Holy Mother, be cross when you come!

Holy Mother, be happy when you go!

The Holy Mother was apparently close by and heard the chanting of the women. A fortnight later, Pooro's mother gave birth to a baby boy. There was much rejoicing. Even distant relatives of the family received felicitations from their friends and neighbours. All that worried Pooro's mother now was that the boy was a trikhal, because he had come after three girls, and so might be ill-starred; they either died young or shortened the lives of their brothers or parents. So the women had to get together again to appease the Holy Mother. They made a hole in a large metal plate, passed the baby through it twice and chanted:

There comes a legion of trikhal –

A legion of trikhal!

After these rituals, the mother felt assured that her son, though a trikhal, would live.

Pooro was now fifteen. She felt a strange upsurge of blood in her limbs. Her breasts burgeoned, her kameez became too tight for her. She bought calico prints from a neighbouring market and had new ones made. She also got a new set of dupattas to match. She had them thickly sprinkled with silver mica.

Pooro's girl friends had pointed out her fiancé, Ram Chand to her; the lad's features became imprinted on Pooro's mind. Whenever she recalled his face, a deep blush came to her cheeks.

Pooro was not allowed to go out of her home by herself. There was a lot of coming and going between the two neighbouring villages and her mother feared that people from Ram Chand's village might see her daughter. There was another reason to be cautious – the Muslims had become very aggressive. Hindu girls never ventured out except in the broad daylight of the afternoon.

Pooro often went across her father's fields and strayed on to the footpath connecting the two villages. She loitered in the neighbouring lots, on the pretext of picking spinach. Sometimes she would go to the jamun tree, shake its branches and spend a long time gathering the fruit. She would keep her friends engaged in gossip while her eyes watched the footpath which led to Ram Chand's village. She prayed that Ram Chand might come that way, so that she could have a good look at him. The very thought would set her heart beating faster. And then her night would be spent in dreaming of the young man who was soon to become her husband



One day when Pooro went out with her friends, she wore her new pair of slippers which cut into her

heels. Her feet hurt, she began to lag behind. Her friends turned back to the village. The twilight began to deepen across the sky like a mass of molten lead. The footpath ran in a zig-zag path through fallow land, passed under groves of peepul trees and then skirted clusters of bushes. Pooro saw her friends long way ahead of her. A large blister had come up on her right heel. She took off her slippers and hurried barefoot.

The girls had teased Pooro that her right foot hurt because her right side was heavier than her left. They had said that right hand was also bigger than the left. "You will see when the wedding bangles are slipped on your arms," said they mischievously. She saw it all taking place before her eyes; the girls forcing red ivory bangles on to her arms; the bigger sliding on easily; the smaller slipping on the left arm but unable to go over the right hand. The barber, whose job it was, would grease her wrists with oil and try to force her hand through the ivory bangle. Would it stand the strain? The bangle was the symbol of marital bliss. If one broke, it was a sure sign of disaster to come – perhaps of an early widowhood. Pooro looked angrily at her right hand. She prayed that Ram Chand would live to a great age – to a hundred thousand years or more.

Pooro was lost in her thoughts. A man suddenly emerged from behind a peepul tree and stood in the middle of the path, barring her way. It was the Muslim lad, Rashida. He was a powerfully built youth in his early twenties. His lips were curled in a mischievous smile. His eyes were glued on Pooro's still unformed breasts.

Pooro screamed and ran past Rashida. When she caught up with her friends on the outskirts of the village she was out of breath and terrified.

"Was it a boy or a tiger?" the girls teased her. Pooro was too distracted to reply. "You are a little ninny!" said one of them. "You are lucky it wasn't a bear! A tiger devours its victims. A bear is said to take a woman to his cave and behave towards her as if she were its wife."

The girls burst out laughing.

Pooro shuddered at the prospect. The unfortunate wretch who had to lie with a bear! The more she thought of it, the paler she became. She saw Rashida's hairy, powerful form and glowing eyes. She heard the laughter of her friends disappear down the village lane.

Two days later Pooro went out to the fields to pick radish beans. She plucked a handful and went to a neighbouring well. She washed the beans and put a tender one in her mouth. She heard a sound and looked up. Rashida was standing by the trunk of a tree staring at her. Pooro felt the blood drain from her legs.

"Why the fear, beautiful? I am your slave." Rashida had the same mischievous smile as before on his face.

Rashida looked like an enormous grizzly bear. Would he stretch out his arms and with his big claws draw her into an embrace? Would he caress her neck with his sharp nails? Would he drag her to his cave and...?

Two peasants came along the path. Even that did not put Rashida off. He stayed where he was, with a lecherous grin on his face. Pooro fled to her home.

Pooro said nothing about these encounters to her parents. Her friends advised her that it was not the sort of thing one told one's father or mother. They told her that all men stared at young women and

described themselves as their servants or slaves; one should not take that sort of nonsense too seriously. Let the men talk! Did people stop walking on the roads for fear of the dogs' barking at them?

Pooro's wedding day was drawing near. Her father had hoarded tins of ghee and sacks of flour to feed his guest. Her mother had filled a wooden chest with embroidered dupattas and dresses of pure silk she had brought from Thailand. Her finger-tips had become sore crinkling the dupattas. The out-house was all a glitter with brass utensils to be given away in the dowry. Pooro had herself got together small pieces of embroidery to make her bedspread. She made wickerwork baskets and moorhas with her own hands.



One evening while her mother was giving her breast to her baby son, Pooro decided to cook spinach. She picked tender leaves of sarson, sliced them into tiny bits and washed them twice. She scrubbed the saucepan with a bundle of coarse string and put the spinach into it. She added chick-peas till the saucepan was full up to the brim and put it on a gentle fire to simmer. She pushed more faggots under the saucepan.

Pooro was like her mother's right hand; she could cook and look after the home without much effort. Pooro's mother saw her daughter busy with the cooking. A deep sigh escaped the mother's lips. She would soon be losing her; then her home would look utterly empty. Her eyes filled with tears. She began to sing a daughter's lament:

O Mother of mine, clasp me to your bosom
And answer just one question
Tell me not a long tale.
Tell me why you bore me If tonight we have to part?

The mother's voice choked with emotion and she began to sob. She controlled her sobs and started again in a faltering voice:

I have got out my spinning-wheel,
I have my wads of cotton,
I'll spin sheets with square patterns
To sons are given homes and palaces;
Daughters are exiled to foreign lands.

Pooro ran up to her mother and clasped her by the knees. Mother and daughter burst into tears.

The afternoon shadows had begun to lengthen across the courtyard. It occurred to Pooro's mother that they had only cooked one vegetable and it would be embarrassing if someone were to turn up unexpectedly from her daughter's fiancé's family. She asked Pooro to get a handful of okra beans from the fields.

Pooro had an uneasy feeling. She took one of her little sisters with her. She plucked okra and radish beans and the two turned back homeward. From behind her came the sound of horse-hoofs in full gallop. Before she could get off the footpath she felt something hit her violently on her right shoulder. She reeled under the blow; she felt a human arm entwined about her waist and lift her into the air. She found herself lying across the horse's saddle.

Pooro's shrieks faded into the distance as the horse and rider flew across the fields of Chatto village.

Pooro did not know from where the horse had come, nor who was the man riding it; she did not know how far she had been carried. She had lost consciousness, and when she came to her senses she found herself on a charpoy in a room with the door shut. She banged her forehead against the walls and hammered the door with her bare hands till she fell exhausted. She felt someone rub hot ghee on her scalp. For a moment she believed it was her mother beside her pillow. An agonized cry escaped her lips: "Amma!"

"My sins be forgiven me! Speak to me just once!" said a voice beside her. Pooro raised her fevered head. It was Rashida. She shrieked and fell back unconscious on her charpoy. She dreamed she was in a cave. A black bear was combing her hair with its claws. She shrank in size, while the bear grew bigger and bigger. The bear took her in its shaggy embrace...

Pooro opened her eyes and stared vacantly at the ceiling. Someone was rubbing the soles of her feet. He gently pressed her shoulders and with his hands poured water between her lips. He put a teaspoonful of hot ghee mixed with gur into her mouth. She took a sip and spat out the rest.

She sat up on the charpoy. "Where am I?" "You are with me," was his simple reply. He sat on a wooden stool in front of her. He had lowered his eyes; he did not have the courage to look Pooro in the face.

"Why have you brought me here?" asked Pooro boldly. "I will tell you another time," he replied and went out of the room leaving the door ajar.

Pooro saw a small courtyard leading to another room and with an entrance on to the street. She got up from the charpoy. Her legs shook beneath her. She walked round the room, examining the walls. After a while she ventured out into the courtyard. In one corner there was a heap of ashes. Beside the heap were a baking plate, a brass pot and a saucepan. In a niche in the wall was a pitcher of water. She could not see any sign of life.

With faltering steps she went towards the entrance. The door was shut as firmly as her own fate. Pooro put her head against the door, but it refused to be moved by her sorrowing face or by her tears. She screwed up all her courage and beat upon the door with her hands. It did not give in, nor did her hammering attract anyone's attention. She peered through the crevices. Outside was a vast stretch of open ground. She could see no houses, huts or hovels or any sign of life. She wiped her face with the hem of her shirt and turned back. She poured out the water from the pitcher into her palm and splashed it in her eyes.

The door opened. Rashida entered and bolted it from inside. He put a double padlock on the door.

"Pooro, why waste so much time and energy? Come inside and have something to eat. You have had nothing for two days," said Rashida. He did not try to take her by the hand. He did not even look lecherously at her.

"Rashida, have pity on me! Take me back to my people!"

Pooro clasped his feet.

Rashida picked her up and took her in his powerful arms. "Who will quench the fire in my heart?" he asked. Pooro tried to free herself, but could not get out of his embrace.

The day passed – and the night. The door remained closed, with Rashida guarding it like a sentinel. After some days he began to take her out for a few minutes before dawn and after twilight. Pooro said that their hut was in the middle of a large orchard. It was probably meant for the gardener, but she did not see or hear anyone tending the fruit. The days were long – the nights endless. She was, however, grateful that Rashida had not said a harsh word to her and her honour was unsullied. He took as little notice of her entreaties as he did of her curses.

By her own reckoning she had spent a full fortnight in the prison.

One day Rashida brought a silk dress of bright red and placed it in front of Pooro. He told her bluntly, “Tomorrow you have to wear this; a Maulvi will be coming to perform our nikah. Be ready in time.” He continued in his matter-of-fact tone, “Woman, that which has not happened yet must now come to pass.” Pooro again fell at Rashida’s feet and pleaded with him. He remained unmoved. “Pooro, your entreaties will not make the slightest difference. Do not make me feel as if I had committed a murder. I swear by Allah, I cannot bear to see you crying all the time.

“Tell me, in the name of your Allah, why did you do this to me?” she asked.

“Maybe we were man and wife in a previous life,” he replied naively. “But why do you bother your head with such things? What was to happen has happened. I promise that no harm will come to you for the rest of your life.” He continued, after a pause, “Did you know that our families, the Shaikhs and the Sahukars have been at loggerheads for many generations? Your grandfather had advanced us Rs.500 on compound interest and taken our house as mortgage. We could not redeem the mortgage. He attacked our house and had the entire Shaikh family ejected. We were rendered homeless.

That was not all. His agents used foul language towards our womenfolk, and your uncle kept my father’s sister in his house for three nights – with the knowledge of your grandfather! The Shaikhs were then like a bundle of sugarcane from which all the juice had been squeezed out. They wept bitter tears of blood and bided their time. My grandfather made my uncles swear that they would avenge these insults. When we heard of the plans of your wedding, there was talk of settling of old scores. They picked on me; they made me take an oath on the Koran that I would abduct the Sahukar daughter before she was wed.”

Pooro heard the story of her fate with resignation. Rashida continued: “Allah is my witness that on the very first day I cast my eyes on you, I fell in love with you. It was my love and the prodding of the Shaikh clan that made me do this. But I cannot bear to see you so sad.”

“If my uncle abducted your aunt, what fault was that of mine? You have reduced me to a homeless vagand.” Pooro held her head between her hands, her face was wet with tears.

“That is exactly what I told my uncles, but they taunted me.” “And at their instigation you took my life!” cried Pooro.

“Pooro, I will put the world at your feet,” said Rashida in a voice full of emotion. “I will love you as long as

I love. I will not behave the way your uncle behaved towards my aunt.”

“Rashida, let me see my mother once.”

“Good woman, you have no place in that family any more! If they let you in even once, not one of their Hindu friends or relatives will take a drop of water in their house. And you have been with me

for fifteen days.”

“I have only eaten your food and drunk your water, I...” Pooro could not put the rest into words.

“Who will believe it? I will first marry you and only then...” Rashida looked up nervously at the girl.

Pooro thought of what her wedding was to be like. She would have bathed in oil and massaged with stick of turmeric; her arms would have been loaded with red ivory bangles, and tasseled strings of cowrie-shells would have been tied to her wrists. She would have worn a dress of pure silk; she would have ridden to Ram Chand’s home in a palanquin; she would have been the world’s most beautiful bride...and then...

“My parents must have had a terrible time,” she said at last.

“I suppose they cried and beat their breasts in the same way as my grandfather and my uncles must have done when my aunt was taken,” replied Rashida without much pity in his voice; then he added with a cynical smile: “The police have been searching for you but have reported that they could not find any clue. How could they? They have taken exactly Rs.500 from us. We have the upper hand now. Most of the villagers are Muslims; no Hindu dare raise his eyes before us. They are lucky their lives and property are safe. They know that if they want to keep their heads on their shoulders, they had better stay quiet.” There was bitterness in Rashida’s voice. Perhaps the old fire of revenge was not extinct.

Hate welled up in Pooro’s heart as she heard Rashida’s words. He had robbed her of her birthright; he had robbed her of her future. Her parents had probably given her up for lost and left the village.

“Have my parents left for Thailand?” she asked quietly.

“Not yet.”

“How far are we from my village?” she asked.

“Not very far. But don’t even dream of going to Chatto. When things settle down, I will take you there myself. Perhaps after six months or so.”



That morning Pooro planned her escape. To avoid suspicion, she ate all the sweet rice and curries Rashida brought for her. At night she stole the key of the door from beneath his pillow. Later, when he was fast asleep, she quietly unlocked the door and stepped out of her prison.

The pitch black of the night terrified her; she almost turned back. She was not sure if she would be able to find her way to Chatto. She might fall into the hands of some rustic worse than Rashida! The faces of her mother, brothers and sisters appeared before her eyes. She took the path she believed led to her home. The dim light of the coming dawn made the landscape somewhat clearer. She found herself on the right path and saw the outlines of her village.

Now the die was cast. She used all her strength and began to run. She came to the village and reached the lane that led to her home. The sky had not turned grey when she found herself before her father’s threshold.

Pooro rattled the chain. The door opened from the other side and she fell on the courtyard. She had

used up all her strength; as soon as she reached the winning-post she had collapsed. She lay on the mud floor moaning like a wounded animal. She found her parents standing above her with oil lamps in their hands; she saw tears streaming from her mother's eyes. She felt her mother take her in her arms and clasp her to her bosom, as a cry of anguish broke from her heart.

"The neighbours will hear. There will be a crowd," warned her father. Pooro's mother stuffed her mouth with the hem of her shirt.

"Daughter, this fate was ordained for you, we are helpless." Pooro heard her father's voice. She clung to her mother. "The Shaikhs will descend on us and destroy everything we have." "Take me to Thailand with you!" cried Pooro.

"Who will marry you now? You have lost your religion and your birthright. If we dare to help you, we will be wiped out without a trace of blood left behind to tell of our fate."

"Then destroy me with your own hands."

"Daughter, it would have been better if you had died at birth! If the Shaikhs find you here they will kill your father and your brothers. They will kill all of us," said the mother, hardening her heart.

Pooro remembered Rashida's words: "You have no place in that home now." But what about her fiancé, Ram Chand? What was the difference between being engaged and being married? Why had he not bothered to come to her help? There was one hope for her: escape in death.

Pooro got up and went out of the door. Neither her mother nor her father tried to stop her. When she had come this way earlier, she had believed she was returning to life; she had wanted to live again, to be with her mother and father. She had come full of hope. Now she had no hope, nor any fear. What more could anyone take from her than life? The thought dried up all her tears.

Rashida came running breathlessly towards her. Pooro stopped in her footsteps. Even death had slammed the door in her face. Rashida grabbed her by the arm. She followed him without a word.

The third day the Maulvi came with another two or three men. They performed Pooro's marriage ceremony with Rashida. A few days later Rashida told her that her parents had left for Thailand.

Rashida's parents were dead. He had no sisters; only brothers and uncles. He decided to leave his village for another, called Sakkar, a few miles away, where a distant cousin, Rahima, had some land. He could exchange some of his land with Rahima's and make his home there. He told Pooro of his plan. There was no reaction from her – after her parents had turned her away from their door, leaving the ancestral village did not seem so momentous. All said and done, what difference did it make? All villages were alike.

Rashida packed his odds and ends in a few steel trunks and set out for Sakkar. Pooro followed him. The blind follows a guide. They found a small house some distance from Raima's. The first relations of Rashida's that Pooro met were the women of Rahima's household. They did not pester her with many questions; they only wanted to find out if she needed anything for her new home and whether they could be of any help. Nevertheless, Pooro felt like a stray calf in a strange herd of cows.

There were more changes in store for her. Till then Rashida had called her by her proper Hindu name. One day he brought a stranger with him and asked his wife to stretch out her arm. The man tattooed on it the new name she had been given when she was married to Rashida. From that day "Hamida" was not only inscribed on her skin in dark green letters but everyone began to call her by that name.

In her dreams, when she met her old friends and played in her parents' home, everyone still called her Pooro. At other times she was Hamida. It was a double life: Hamida by day, Pooro by night. In reality, she was neither one nor the other, she was just a skeleton, without a shape or a name.

Six months later a tiny life began to stir inside her frame.



The sky was a colourless grey. Hamida sat on her haunches with a piece of sacking between her feet and her eyes fixed on space.

Rashida came from the front door into the courtyard. The sound of his footsteps did not reach her ears nor the sight of his form register on her eyes. She was like a statue. Rashida sat down beside her, put his arm round her shoulders and began tenderly, "Woman of God..."

Hamida did not move away. After a long time she said, "I feel something stabbing inside me."

"You never go out, nor meet anyone." Rashida remarked after a while. "Being alone all the time bound to depress you."

"Where can I go to? Whom am I related except to you?" she replied with great bitterness.

Rashida did not say anything for some time. He lit the fire in the hearth and put the quails he had brought with him into the pot. He again put his arm round his wife's shoulders as the two watched the birds cooking.

"You are the mistress of this home. In a few days more another being will be playing about in your courtyard. Even if you don't care for me, you should try to be cheerful for the sake of the child. What wrong has the innocent little one done to you?"

Hamida thought of the slimy slug in the pea-pod. It was nauseating.

"Would you like some peas to go with the quails?" asked Rashida, seeing them heaped in front of Hamida.

"They are over-ripe; the season for peas is over. It will soon be Baisakh." She could not bear the thought of eating peas that day.

"Tomorrow is the first of Baisakh," said Rashida casually. "There will be a big festival."

Baisakh ! The word struck like a gong in Hamida's ears. It continued the strike – Baisakh! She quickly got up and busied herself kneading flour to bake chaptis.

"It would be nice to have sweet vermicelli after the quails," said Rashida. Hamida went in, got vermicelli and a lump of gur.

She recalled once telling her mother when she was rolling vermicelli. "Mother, I would much prefer to eat it out of a machine." And her mother had retorted brusquely: "Fie girl, only the Muslims eat machine-made vermicelli!" The memory brought tears to Hamida's eyes. Then she began to laugh.

Rashida looked up, surprised. "What makes you laugh?" She told him and started to laugh again. Rashida's smile changed to a shy snigger.

Next morning Pooro was awakened by the sound of drums. She went up on to the roof and saw peasants gathering in the fields – tall, powerfully-built rustics with new lungis round their waists carrying polished bamboo staves which glistened in the sun. It was an animated crowd, with groups moving restlessly from one end of the gathering to the other. There were some people on horseback with their wives perched behind them and a child or two in front. Others were on foot leading the children by the hand, with their women trailing after them. There were young bucks strutting about with their broad chests puffed out like pouter-pigeons. There was much yelling and shouting; the bursts of song. In one corner they had dug over the earth and men were wrestling there. Even from the distance Hamida caught the smell of sweet, succulent jalebis and hot pakoras being fried in oil. She could see mounds of sweet meats spread out in broad iron trays. Then the thought pierced through her heart like a steel shaft: her mother had borne a son after three daughters and this was his first Baisakh. She must have given her baby brother his first sip of water – touched his lips with a rose-petal dipped in the river. Their kinsmen must have come over to offer their good wishes ... perhaps at that time her mother's thoughts would have strayed to her first-born, Pooro!

Hamida had no tears left in her eyes. She simply held her head between her hands and remained where she was for a long time.

A party of young lads with flowers entwined round their ears came along the street below; they laughed with gay abandon. One of the boys raised his voice and sang:

Beside the well sat a maiden fair,
Brushing her teeth as bright as pearls.
Fear not, maiden. He that loves you
Shall come and take you away.
He shall come and steal you away.
He shall come without your bidding.
He shall make you his own one day.

Why had Ram Chand not come for her? Did he not love her? It was Rashida who had come without her bidding; it was Rashida who had stolen her away and made her his wife. But did he love her?

The peasants danced the Bhangra as they went along. They yelled and leapt in the air. Then one of them sang a few couplets on his own:

When your nose-ring gleamed in the sun
The ploughmen left their ploughing.
Your wet lungi sticks to your bottom
Maiden fair, turn not your back to us.

Why were all the songs sung in praise of pretty girls? Why did someone not compose songs of lament for girls in her predicament? Why not hymns for those whom God has discarded?

A party of girls came down the lane. They were young, but there was the impatience of youthful womanhood in their movements. They passed by the Bhangra dancers. The boys stole sidelong glances at the girls; they giggled like the girls, then made bawdy jokes and roared with laughter. What if the boys were suddenly to pick up the girls and carry them away on their horses? What if all the girls were abducted...? Thus passed the festival of the first of Baisakh.

It was mid-summer. The earth burned like an oven full of dry faggots. Hamida was restless; she stood up, sat down, lay flat on her back. But nothing calmed her, not even the bowls of water that she gulped down repeatedly. The women advised her to wash her hair and take a bath, because there was no knowing when the child might come. Then she would not be able to leave her bed for several days.

With each bout of pain Hamida got paler, till her face was as white as cotton. To Rashida she looked exactly as she had when he had grabbed her and thrown her across his saddle – as white as punic stone. That day her cries had come out of the anguish of her soul; today they rose out of the anguish of the flesh.

Rashida sent for Rahima's mother. By the time she arrived, Hamida's pains were following each other in quick succession. Rahima's mother sent for the midwife. The midwife came, spread an old mat on the ground and laid Hamida on it. After the soft bed, the hard floor hurt Hamida and she began to whimper.

Rashida stood guard on the threshold. He could hear Hamida's long, stifled moans through the closed door. He wished he could take some if not all of the pain from his wife's body into his. But there she was – all alone in her suffering.

The midwife fanned Hamida's face. Rahima's mother poured water into her mouth with a teaspoon. Rashida heard Hamida shriek thrice; then the crying of a newborn babe fell on his ears. He breathed a protracted sigh of relief; at long last the agony was over. He wanted to go inside to massage his wife's limbs and give her comfort. He wanted to make up to her. So far, he had brought her nothing but tears. But the midwife and Rahima's mother were still busy inside.

The minutes slowly ticked by and there was not a sound from within. Rashida's heart sank. Was Hamida dead?

One full hour later, the midwife came out and said, "Congratulations, son. You have been blessed with a son."

"And how is she?" the question escaped Rashida's lips. "She is all right," replied the midwife with a reassuring smile. "That is how the family tree bears fruit. Sons do not drop down through the ceiling, do they?" She exuded the sense of assurance which had helped hundreds of women to bear the travail.

When Rashida went in, Hamida was lying in bed with her eyes closed. Beside her, wrapped in white cloth, sucking his thumb, was their son. Rashida was overcome with emotion. He had won over the Hindu girl. The gamble had paid off. Pooro was no longer the girl he had abducted and made his mistress – not a woman he had brought in as a housekeeper. She was Hamida, the mother of his son.

Rashida took a silver rupee and a lump of gur and waved them over his son's head. Hamida opened her eyes. They seemed to say, "What more do you want of me? Have given you my person and I have given you a son. I have nothing more to give." Then she closed her eyes.

The women poured hot gur mixed with almonds between Hamida's lips. This revived her and she opened her eyes again. She felt her son's soft face nuzzling into her bare arm. A cold, clammy feeling ran through her body – as if a slimy slug was clambering over her. She clenched her teeth; she wanted to shake the slug off her arm, flick it away from her side, draw it out as one draws out a thorn by taking its head between one's nails, pluck it out of her flesh like a tick or a leech and cast it away....

Four days after Hamida had been delivered of her son, her breasts filled with milk. On the fifth day the midwife (who had been feeding the babe with drops of milk squeezed from wads of cotton wool) put the boy to his mother's breast. A strange, strong emotion welled up in Hamida's bosom. She wanted to put the child against her cheek and cry to her heart's content. The boy was a toy made of her own blood, a statue carved out of her own flesh. In all the teeming world, this boy was all that really belonged to her. She did not care if she never again saw the faces of her mother, father, brothers or sisters ... she would gaze at the face of her son in whose veins mingled the blood of her parents – the parents who had cast her aside.

The boy tugged at his mother's breast. Hamida felt as if the boy was drawing the milk from her veins and was sucking it out with force, just as his father had used force to take her. All said and done, he was his father's son, this father's flesh and blood and shaped like him. He had been planted inside her by force, nourished inside her womb against her will – and was now sucking the milk from her breasts whether she liked it or not.

The thought went round and round in her head with insidious insistence: This boy ... this boy's father ... all mankind ... all men ... men who gnaw a woman's body like a dog gnawing a bone and like a dog consuming it.

The boy continued to suck at his mother's breasts, while Hamida's mind continued to fill and empty like the buckets of a Persian wheel.

Out of this conflict of hate and love, love and hate, were born Hamida's son and Hamida's love for her husband, Rashida.

The weather had turned cool; the nip in the air presaged the advent of winter. One morning Hamida went out to the fields in the very early hours, as was her habit.

It was still dark when she came to the well used by the Muslims and began to wash herself. In the grey light of the dawn she recognized the girl, Kammo, who lived in the same lane as her parents. Kammo put her pitcher on the parapet of the well to rest herself. She quickly picked up her pitcher when she saw Hamida coming towards her; but it was too heavy and she could not raise it to her shoulder. It began to slip in her hands; she grabbed it by the neck to prevent it from falling. A cry escaped her lips: "Mother!"

Hamida went up to Kammo. She wanted to take the heavy pitcher from the shoulders of the frail twelve-year-old girl, but hesitated to make the move. Kammo managed to hoist it on to her head. The two began to walk side by side. Hamida saw that it was the same barefooted Kammo, in the same coarse, hand-spun, green cotton salwar and striped shirt frayed at the shoulders and patched all over. Her dirty dupatta was in tatters and her hair untidily scattered over her face. Hamida had never particularly wanted to befriend Kammo, but that morning she was impelled to make a friendly gesture.

"It is very late," remarked Kammo, buried beneath the pitcher. She wanted to be reassured that it was not really as late as she thought.

"The dawn hasn't come up yet," replied Hamida in a soothing voice. The girl was reassured; she put her pitcher on the ground. Hamida also stopped. Kammo's pale face lit up with a faint smile. Hamida had never before seen the girl smile. She always curled her lips up in a very curious way, as if sucking something.

“Kammo, do you come around this time every day?”

“I am rather late today; I will get a thrashing,” replied Kammo, grabbing the pitcher again. The smile drained from her face like the colour running off a cloth. The old melancholic look returned.

“Is the old woman related to you?”

“She is my aunt.” The pitcher began to slip down Kammo’s arm.

“I can carry the pitcher for you,” said Hamida, without extending her hand. Everyone knew that she was a Muslim ... Hamida the wife of Rashida. And Kammo was a Hindu girl.

“You will pollute my pitcher,” replied Kammo unabashedly.

“I will not touch the water. You can scrub the pitcher from outside.” Said Hamida laughing. Kammo also sniggered, but she did not let go of her pitcher. The two continued walking.

They had barely gone a few steps when Kammo stumbled. Hamida caught the pitcher, but Kammo fell on a heap of rubble and sprained her foot. Hamida put aside the pitcher and massaged Kammo’s ankle with her palms. The pain subsided and Kammo was able to walk again. Every time her foot hurt, she cried, “Hai Ma!” The girl heaped all her misfortunes on her dead mother.

Hamida had often heard Kammo’s aunt grumble. “They had the wretch to torture us!” When her mother died, Kammo’s father had taken another woman and moved to the city. Her father’s mistress refused to have anything to do with Kammo. So Kammo was abandoned by her father as well. People often say that when a person’s mother dies, even a real father becomes a stepfather. It was Hamida’s ill luck that her real father had become a stepfather before becoming a widower, and her real mother had, without being a widow, become like a stepmother.



The eastern horizon turned grey. The outlines of the houses could be seen clearly. The two girls arrived at the corner of the street and, becoming apprehensive lest someone see them, Kammo took over herp itched and limped homewards, while Hamida quickened her steps.

That afternoon, while Hamida was trying to pacify her child, her outer door was pushed open and Kammo burst in. Hamida put Javed aside and took Kammo in her arms. Kammo had almost forgotten to cry, but the warmth of Hamida’s embrace brought a flood of tears to her eyes. Hamida’s maternal instincts were roused. She wished to mother the unwanted Kammo, to spoil her, to let her be petulant and indulge in her tantrums; to take her in her lap and walk about with Kammo in her arms; to kiss her over and over again.

But Hamida was a Muslim and Kammo was a Hindu. And even though she still thought of herself as a Pooro, she knew that Kammo would not eat anything in her home. Hamida was very much wanted to break pieces of bread and feed Kammo with her own hands; to hold the bowl of milk for the girl which she drank.

Hamida again massaged Kammo’s foot, rubbed it with ghee and pressed on it wads of warm cotton wool.

Suddenly, Kammo became impatient. Her aunt’s grim face looked like a hatchet before her mind’s eye. She took up the sewing needle for which she professed to have come. Hamida also gave her

lump of gur and almonds.

Kammo seldom changed her clothes. She wore the same tattered shirt in summer and on the coldest days of winter. She never had anything on her feet, Hamida gave her a new pair of slippers. Kammo explained to her aunt, "I found them in the sugarcane field."

Only in the dim light of the early mornings did Hamida dare to help Kammo with her pitcher of water. And Kammo had to make all kinds of excuses to visit Hamida; sometimes to grind chickpeas in the hand mill; sometimes to pound pieces in the mortar. Little Javed got to know Kammo. Whenever she failed to turn up, Hamida would chide her on behalf of her son. Hamida and Kammo behaved towards each other like mother and daughter, as well as like two close friends. Hamida gave Kammo things to eat and clothes to wear, Kammo's frail body began to fill up; her sallowness, sunken cheeks became plump and rounded. Hamida helped her wash her hair and then oiled and plaited it.

One early morning Kammo came while it was still dark.

She burst into tears as soon as she entered. She looked like a squeezed lemon. Hamida hugged her to her bosom and kissed her on the forehead, but Kammo could not control her sobs. Her dupatta and her hands were wet with tears.

"My aunt says that if I come to your house again she will suck the blood out of my body," sobbed Kammo. She put her head in Hamida's lap.

"Why? What have I done?" asked Hamida.

"Aunty says she has heard that you have run away from your home and I may do the same," explained Kammo, stifling her sobs.

The morning light was getting brighter. Hamida felt something snap inside her. That was the last she saw of Kammo.



Hamida had suffered much; the suffering had aged her. She was only twenty years old, but the twenty years had taught her more than she could ever have learnt in an age. She had become as serious and as thoughtful as an old philosopher. Only she could not put her many thoughts into words. Her emotions rose like foam on the crest of a wave, were battered against the rocks of experience and subsided once more into the water.

Occasionally Hamida called on Rahima's two wives she was not particularly interested in them but was drawn towards a young, sallowness-faced girl who lives next door. The girl had large, melancholic eyes which she lowered every time she saw Hamida. Hamida had a feeling that the girl wanted to get to know her and that they had much in common. She was not wrong. She learnt that the girl had been married two years earlier and had been ill since her wedding day. No one knew what it was that troubled the girl; her skin had become the colour of a spring onion; her face, yellow like a stick of turmeric. Some people said that she was possessed by a spirit; others, that she had contracted some unknown disease.

Hamida and the girl began to exchange smiles when they passed each other in the village. The girl's mother had sent Hamida some yarn to the girl's mother to have it woven into a bed-sheet. This gave her the opportunity to get to know the girl. Her name was Taro.

Taro was due to return shortly to her husband. She had been getting fainting fits; she had them every time she was due to go back to her house. Each time she returned to her parents, she was thinner than before. Her bones stuck out of her flesh. But no one did anything about her.

One day Taro happened to be by herself. Hamida sat down beside her and began to ply her with questions: "Taro, surely there is someone who can diagnose your trouble!"

"No, not a soul."

"Has someone felt your pulse?"

"I have had my fill of preserves wrapped in silver paper and bottles of arrack."

"Taro, you must tell me: Why do you allow this disease to destroy your life?"

"It will only lighten the weight of the world."

"You don't have so much to weigh down the world with; your going will not make much difference. Have you ever thought of the feelings of your mother, who took the trouble to bring you up?"

"I could not care less," replied Taro brusquely. "She will shed a few tears and then forget about me. After a while she burst out: "When parents give away a daughter in marriage, they put a noose around her neck and hand the other end of the rope to the man of their choice."

"Maybe it's the water of your husband's village that is upsetting your stomach," suggested Hamida.

"A woman has to get used to every kind of water," said Taro with some passion.

"Taro, I am your friend. Why don't you tell me?"

"What can I tell you?" when a girl is given away in marriage, God derives her of her tongue, so that she may not complain.

"You are absolutely right," agreed Hamida.

"My parents have no use for me; parents never have for a married daughter. And my husband has no use for me, because another woman is mistress of both his heart and house."

"Taro, do you mean to tell me that your husband was already married?" asked Hamida surprised.

"Why did your parents give you to him?"

"They did not know. Besides, at the time he was only keeper her."

"Surely, his parents must have known."

"They certainly knew. She was a low-caste woman. His parents wished to get a daughter-in-law of their own caste."

"Did they have no thought for the girl they proposed to get as their daughter-in-law?"

"Sister, who bothers about other people's sorrows! Besides, they say" "We feed and clothe the girl. We give her money to spend. What has she to grumble about?"

"As if food and clothing were all a woman wanted!"

said Hamida.

“For two years I have had to sell my body for a mess of pottage and a few rags. I am like a whore . . . like a common prostitute . . .” Taro clenched her fists; her eyes turned up in their sockets showing on the whites; her body stiffened like a plank of wood.

There was no one in the house. Hamida began to press the girl’s limbs and massage the soles of her feet. Taro came to in a little while, but continued to mumble: “Don’t touch me! I am unclean! Don’t you see, I am a slut, a whore, a common tart . . .” The girl was babbling away foolishly when her mother entered.

“What am I to do?” wailed the mother, when she heard Taro. “As if fate had not enough shafts for me, this girl adds her barbed words to kill me! She and her brother will prove the death of us. He’s picked up strange ideas at his college in Lahore and has stuffed the girl’s brain with a lot of nonsense.”

“Amma, you can’t deny it’s been very hard for her,” protested Hamida.

“Once we give away a daughter our lips are sealed. It’s up to her husband to treat her as he likes. It is a man’s privilege,” explained the mother.

“Only my lips are sealed and my feet put in fetters,” exploded Taro. “There is no justice in the world nor any God. He can do what he likes; there is no God to stop him. God’s fetters were meant only for my feet.”

Taro had a second fit. Her fists were clenched and her legs stiffened. Her mother splashed water on her face and poured a few drops into her mouth.



Hamida was taken aback. This was the first time she had come across a girl who had such views and who could speak her mind so boldly. She had often wanted to say things like that herself, but had never dared. Taro continued to mumble: “This is a big fraud. I have been swindled . . . I was never married . . . You are lying; the whole lot of you are liars . . . Why do you hold me? Let me alone. Get away from me . . .” She punctuated her words by kicking her heels in the ground.

“Taro pull yourself together. Don’t blurt out everything that comes into your mind. What will people say if they overhear you?” chided the mother, her eyes brimming with tears.

Taro would come to and then collapse like a deflated sack.

“Don’t say such stupid things when you return to your husband’s home,” continued her mother. “It does not matter how he behaves. Allah is always there to see whatever goes on. Allah was witness to your marriage.”

“Mother, if Allah was a witness to my wedding, then Allah perjured himself. I was never wed . . . never . . .” Taro gaped vacant-eyed at the beams in the roof.

Hamida wondered how Taro, who could dare to say such things, was yet unable to break out of the perfidious institution of marriage.

It was late in the afternoon. Hamida rose with a sigh. She had seen other people’s sorrows. They made her own troubles appear very small. She had heard of houses that were not homes. Taro’s story made

her own home appear like a haven of refuge.

Hamida wanted to forget that Rashida had abducted and wronged her. She longed fervently to make love to him. After all, he was her husband and the father of her son. This alone was true; this alone mattered. The rest was mere prattle and a lie.

Hamida settled down in Sakkar as if she had always belonged to the village. She showed no desire to go anywhere else. ("I did not come here of my own will, nor will I leave of my own will," she used to say). Her son Javed was almost two. He could run about on his own. He was the apple of his father's eye. Rashida loved his son's childish prattle and the endearing way he clung to his legs and called him "Abba!" The two played hide-and-seek in the evenings and had lots of fun. The boy was full of mischief. He would put his hands in the wet clay with which his mother plastered her oven; he would mix turmeric and chillis in her buttermilk. The home was full of the child's contagious laughter.

One day a woman came to their door selling toys. Javed dragged his mother to the toy-seller. Hamida gave the woman a handful of grain and some old garments in exchange for a straw rattle. She was still talking to her when she heard a lot of commotion. Suddenly a woman came running down the street screaming like one possessed by the devil. People picked up their children and bolted the doors of their houses.

The woman wore only a salwar, which covered her from waist to ankles; her belly and breasts were bare. The sun had scorched her skin to the semblance of black parchment. Her hair was tangled and hung like ropes about her shoulders. Her body was caked with dirt and appeared as if she had never been washed since the day she was born. She waved her hands in the air and spread out her legs in an ungainly way. She could not walk, she could only run like an animal. Her laughter was fiendish. Whenever she opened her mouth she bared a row of uneven teeth. Her thin, charred body gave no clue to her age. She was more like a skeleton than a living person.

Before anything could be done to prevent her, the mad woman snatched a handful of clay toys from the toy-seller's basket and ran away. The poor toy-seller looked askance at her depleted basket. The mad woman's hysterical laughter and ghoulish shrieks were heard in Sakkar for a long time. She had come to stay there.

She wandered about the lanes. She ate whatever she could find in the fields. Sometimes a village woman would give her a couple of chapattis which she would devour ravenously. Many gave her the old shirts to cover her naked bosom. She would pluck off the buttons and tear up the shirt. It would hang round her neck in tatters till she tore these up as well and was bare-bosomed again. At times, she even discarded her salwar and walked about without a stitch of clothing. Then some woman would cover her waist with an old salwar and another would drape her breasts with a discarded shirt. And the process would start all over again.

The mad woman became a part of the village. Whenever the urchins teased her, some elder would rebuke them roundly. The woman became a source of terror to the small children. If they were naughty, all their mothers had to say was : "If you don't behave, the mad woman would carry you off." And they would become like little angels.



The woman found an empty shed in the outskirts of the village. Some kind soul spread a tattered mat on the floor. People began to leave food and water for her. The shed became her home and she got in

the habit of spending her nights in it.

The woman did no harm to anyone; she never stole anything. She only took what others discarded and filled her belly with the scraps they gave her. All she did was to run about and laugh with mad abandon.

The woman's thin frame began to fill up. Her waist began to spread out. The village woman tried to cover up her nakedness and persuade her to stay indoors; but nothing would penetrate her mind. She continued the way she was, laughing hysterically and running about.

One evening the elders of the Panchayat took the mad woman by the hand and left her in the dark at some distance from Sakkar. "Out of sight, out of mind!" They assured one another. "Let some other village take care of her now." Next day before noon she was back in Sakkar roaming about the land just as before. Her mad laughter could be heard in the fields.

"What sort of a man could have done this to her?" the women of Sakkar asked each other. They clenched their teeth in anger ... "He must be a savage beast to put a mad woman in this condition."

"She is neither young nor attractive; she is just a lump of flesh without a mind to go with it ... a living skeleton ... a lunatic skeleton ... a skeleton picked to its bones by kites and vultures," thought Hamida.

The mad woman's belly grew bigger day by day.



In the early hours of the morning, while it was still dark, Hamida went out of her home, as was her habit. She took the footpath that led to the fields. She had barely gone a few yards when she noticed the outlines of a human form beside the trunk of a tree. She picked up courage and tiptoed towards the recumbent figure. It was the mad woman. She was dead as a block of stone, and between her legs was a new-born baby, still attached to its mother by the umbilical cord.

An agonized groan escaped Hamida's throat. She shut her eyes and swayed as if she was going to faint. Cold shivers ran up and down her spine. She mustered up courage and ran back home to fetch her husband.

Rashida came and felt the mad woman's pulse. It was not necessary, for death was clearly stamped on her face. But death had not claimed her child, whose heart beat with all the vigour of the primeval life force. It was sucking its left thumb. Hamida covered the body with an old sheet she had brought with her.

"In the name of Allah!" muttered Rashida as he severed the cord. Hamida wrapped the baby in her dupatta.

The news spread in the village like the morning mist. Women dropped the plates in which they were kneading flour; they left the fires burning in their hearths and hurried to Hamida's house. Hamida had bathed and dressed the baby. It lay in a cot as soft and fair as a wad of cottonwool. It sucked the end of the cloth which Hamida had soaked in warm milk. Javed watched over his little guest with a sense of ownership.

"May Allah bless you!"

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