



Life Under One Roof

Chapter 1: My First Visit to London

It is like an acquired taste. To me, it seemed impossible to see East and West meet socially and culturally. At that time, I could never imagine and now, it's evidently before me. A fantasy has turned into a reality.

In sixties, I was a visitor in an alien land and now, I am a citizen of the same land, partly my homeland; permanently the homeland of my offspring!

This land has given me so much; financially, socially, culturally and morally. It took time as it was a natural process to go through; these days, they call it transformation.

I was very keen to see England, and a person who has never travelled in a foreign country, feels all the more interested and excited. It was all due to the kindness of Bha Ji, my elder brother, Malkiat. If he had not come to England, my desire would have remained unfulfilled. In India, the profession of a teacher at a polytechnic college is hardly enough to fulfil the needs of the family. Financially and morally, I have to confess, Bha Ji (brother) had helped us a lot.

This ridiculous incident had happened a day after my arrival in UK. Along with Bha Ji and his friend Subash, I had seen a pub for the first time. Drinking beer at such a place has its own charm. The atmosphere was intoxicated. The bar maids were pretty and ever smiling. One of them was slim and blue eyed, and had long black hair. I felt that I should continue drinking and gazing at her. Perhaps I was doing so. That's why, Bha Ji had said that it didn't behove gazing like this. I felt that I had landed in a fairy-land. Instinctively, the words escaped from my lips, "Well, Bha Ji, I have seen this heaven by grace of you." Those were the days, late sixties and early seventies, left far behind and now things are quite different, both here in UK and back at home, in India.

"Never mind as the layers of this heaven gradually get unfolded, you will get to know" said Subhash addressing me. Bha Ji, first lightly laughed, and then looking upwards at the ceiling said, "When we, too, came here, we had this very misunderstanding to start with."

I couldn't help asking, "But, nothing is there to be misunderstood? You, yourself say that this is the daily life of a common manual worker; In India, it is beyond even a judge, barrister or professor to visit such a place every evening." I wanted to go to the bottom of the matter, for my own information and knowledge. I was very curious indeed.

Subhash gulping half of the jug-like glass said, "You have a very short time for your visit and to understand all these things, you need a long time. Just as sugar cane juice, buttermilk, curds, salads and vegetables are very ordinary things for rural farmers like us, but residents of cosmopolitan city just yearn for them; in the same way, this beer and the bar provide glimpses of the cosmopolitan life. They keep the labourers yoked like the bullock of an oil mill. At the root of all these things, there are imperial interests."

I felt somewhat emotions pouring out of his expressions being a communist person. Subhash tried to make me understand but the matter was still not clear to me.

Then Bha Ji began to say, addressing Subhash, I don't know why? In fact, we could not learn to adapt ourselves well in this alien land, and I suppose, this is the main cause of our sense of depression and lonesomeness, even occasional."

At that time, words like sadness, home sickness and loneliness seemed to me, very strange and uncommon, merely unbelievable. I thought to myself that it amounted to rubbing shoulders with death while enjoying all luxuries. Where is the lonesomeness and what type of depression is there? They are leading a luxurious life, having televisions, nice cars and glory of majestic life, like Sheiks or Nawabs. Within myself, I was comparing the life of UK with the rural life of India of that time. My global knowledge was very confined indeed. Unlike these days, that was a nostalgic time. Somehow, a sense of innocence was obvious in general life. Generally, people were lot more transparent, than these days

We emptied our glasses and were about to get out to return home. I noticed that same pretty bar maid was still filling glasses, smilingly and invitingly.

On our way, Subhash said to Bha Ji, perhaps you may remember, When editor of 'Love-Link' Gurbux Singh from India had stayed with us for a couple of days, he then, said to us "Friends, forget about the past and dreaming about the future. Learn to live in the present. You seem to live still in the past and unnecessarily, worrying about the future. When people settle in foreign lands with families, they never ever returned to their native lands! Just wait, time must come for equality and diversity, and one day, you must feel this country as your own. This country will be a future home land for your children. It is better that you develop kinship with the people of this land. Tomorrow is always better than Today."

"Yes, I remember it very well. It is very true, but everybody cannot be so far-sighted."

During the first week, I felt somewhat bored. Bha Ji returned home at six in the evening and children at four. Immediately after their arrival, they probed the fridge and then cling to the tv or went upstairs to their own rooms. I would try to mix-up with them, but they would not show any inclination. As such, in spite of their presence at home, I felt all alone. I wondered to see them changed in a few years. In India, they were not that much self-centred.

I, always, impatiently, waited for the week end because on that day, Bha Ji took me for an outing somewhere or the other. He took me sometimes to visit some friend or relative and at other times, to see some new places. Once it was the day of Sunday, slightly warm and sunny. Though it was the month of June, the sunshine was like that end of February in India. Bha Ji and his wife resolved to show me the seaside. I was very happy. I had never seen the sea before, like most other people in Punjab. I had seen the sea on the cinema screen only, and once, I had depicted the sea beach in one of my stories, merely on the basis of it. But this Sunday, I was going to see the real sea. We were going to be accompanied by Subhash and his family as well. Bha Ji and Subhash were fast friends and still they are. Such friendship can only last if you think alike and have common characteristics; lifestyle, hobbies and interests.

We reached the seaside after a journey of about an hour and a half by cars. The waves of the blue water were advancing towards the beach as if to say 'welcome' to the visitors. The children of our two families began to indulge in fun and frolic. My sister-in-law and Subhash's wife also followed suit. When the children grow up, the mothers behave like this. Then they do not feel the need of following their husbands, that's what I experienced at that time. We, three, began to walk along the beach. To me, it seemed as if there is some festival of the white people. Bha Ji was telling me the properties of the sea water that if we take a bath in it, our bodies absorb several minerals through the pores.

"Then you must be coming to this place at regular intervals?" I asked.

"No my friend, since we came to England, we have come here for the second time and this time, only because of you. We do not have that much of leisure and it is also a matter of interest," Subhash tried to explain.

"Just as, living among the English people, we have not been able to mix up with them socially or culturally, in the same way, living beside the sea, we have remained far away from it," said Bha Ji casting a glance over the sea.

"Why don't you mix up with these English people?" I just asked.

"The main reason is language and secondly, may be a lack of communication due to different culture. Sometimes, we wish to get closer socially as well as emotionally and then feel, as if these people are not desirable for this sort of social cohesiveness and wish to stay away from us, perhaps that's why we are compelled to be confined within the boundaries of our own communal groups. Somehow, we, Asians have failed so far while West Indians have succeeded to a great extent."

"Why?" I had asked surprisingly!

"I can't give you an exact answer. It could be due to the same language and religion. We can read and write English, but are not good enough to communicate because of different accent."

The water kept advancing towards us and people sitting on the beach, were shifting their places and drifting towards the bank. Some beautiful ladies who had put off their braziers, and were lying prone on the sand got up, and covering their breasts with towels, moved far away when water advanced underneath them, and again, lay on the sand at some distance. An Indian woman was bathing with her sari on, and it was sticking so tightly to her body that despite the sari, she looked bare bodied. I could see hardly any coloured face, may be one in hundred!

"Well friends, we, too, must enjoy little swimming." Bha Ji seemed curious to play with the sea water.

"Leave it, having never ever taken any swimming lessons, I am scared, and also feel somewhat shy." Subhash expressed a mode of double mindedness.

In the meanwhile, a white woman looking like a chiselled statue, past beside us and began to advance ahead. Her waxen body, due to massage and sun tan, wore a hue of copper.

"Look how fond are these women of keeping their bodies in shape," staring at her body, said Bha Ji.

"Really, her body did not have an extra ounce of fat."

“Here, look at our women; they have their stomachs like swollen mass of dough, and loose flesh are hanging,” said Subhash comparatively.

“The state of our men also is the same as compared to our women. That’s why we feel shy to take off our clothes.” Bha Ji paused a little and then, pointing to an Indian man sitting cross-legged, he said, “Look at that man displaying a pitcher like abdomen, as if he were holding a big watermelon on his thighs.”

“Hay, we do not look that much bad; come on, come out of your clothes. OK? I am not going to ask you, too frequently.”

They jumped into the water. I, too, wanted to follow them, but felt shy because of long knickers. They tried very hard to drag me but pretending to be cold, I kept standing at a distance.

After half an hour or so, they came out and Bha Ji said “It’s really a delectable experience and we used to fight shy for nothing.”

“A negative approach towards life or you may call it excessive inferiority complex, is not a good thing or healthy attitude. What additional physical merits have these white people as compared with us, except the white skin?”

When we looked at the watch, it was already four o’ clock. Subhash, feeling thirsty, expressed a desire for cold beer. Then Bha Ji suggested that after reaching home, we would drink at the neighbouring pub.

Travelling back, I felt, hearing the conversation, that Bha Ji’s grievance had been removed to a great extent. He displayed neither a shade of depression nor that of mental loneliness. Rather it seemed that he was feeling his tree of life to strike roots in the soil of this environment. His soul seemed to be an age mate of his children.

Having been home we, three, reached the pub near a park. We had hardly got our glasses filled and taken seats in a corner, when a group of mischievous looking young white guys came and deliberately, sat beside us with an intention to make trouble. That was apparent from their movements.

After sometime, one of them asked, “Got light?”

“Sorry, we don’t smoke ...,” replied Subhash briefly.

“But you do drink....!” And they started laughing aloud.

In the meanwhile one of them, wearing a red t-shirt belched aloud and then asked Subhash “Where you come from?”

“Rainham,” again Subhash gave a brief reply.

At this, all of them began to laugh again.

That man wearing a cunning smile on his lips repeated his question, “I mean what country you come from?”

“Lets leave it; they are not that much ignorant. The rascals are bent upon making trouble for nothing. Better we go home and drink there. Also, we are bit tired today,” saying this Bha Ji got up and we two, followed him.

Returning home, Bha Ji poured big pegs of whiskey and then started recounting the same incident to his wife.

“I always tell you to drink at home, if you must. What is there in pubs and clubs?” retorted his wife hearing the episode.

“Daddy, you were three, all young and fit. Why didn’t you give them a few blows?” said Pappu.

“You scoundrel, is it not enough that we are back home, safe and sound in one piece, and you have not been obliged to carry us home?”

“And other thing, we thought that we have to show the Kew Garden to your uncle; that’s why we wanted to remain wholesome till tomorrow,” Subhash shared a joke like conversation, with Pappu.

“Dad, you should give a reply in the same language, one understands.”

“Police would have taken their side, not ours,” Bha Ji answered Pappu’s question.

“No dad, all the police officers are not the same. Trust me, some are honest and impartial.”

“Yes some, not all.”

“Still, better than Indian police....”

“Shut up you white man.”

“Not white man, you may call me ‘made in UK,’ and with a tongue in cheek, he disappeared into the kitchen.

Though, I had learnt many things about England as compared with the past weeks, but every day, there was something new, for me to learn. What this garden is, I was curious to know. At length, I asked Bha Ji, “What this Kew Garden meant?”

“This garden contains flowers, plants and trees which have been brought from foreign lands, not adapted to English climate.”

“But then, how are they growing or planting them here?” I wondered.

“They have built huge glass-houses at a very high cost. The plants receive the sunshine and humidity created through steam pipes. In this artificial man made climate, they can grow tropical plants according to the need and nature of the plants. Many trees looking like mangoes, and I don’t know what countries they come from, are made to maintain their existence but, do not seem to be flourishing or fruiting as in their natural lands.”

In the evening, I noticed that Bha Ji was not intoxicated; yet consuming the whiskey from his glass, he resumed, “In this country, you may come across several other persons like me and Subhash. We are, all, just like the trees of the Kew Garden. We have tried hard to strike our roots in this soil and environment, but feel, as if we are rootless to some extent. May be because of alien roots! Sometimes I feel, we merely living or existing physically or you may say materially in this land, but actually, mentally and emotionally we reside back home. Story of our children is entirely different,” he gulped the whole peg in one go, and then shifting his pointed finger from children towards me, he resumed, “No matter, we could not learn to strike our roots in this foreign climate or environment; our children will, certainly they will, I can assure. With the time, we may be able to, perhaps one day, changing with the time and circumstances.....matching the lifestyle and attitude with our offspring. Now, we should accept this reality that our children will never ever go back to the lands of their forefathers. And it is equally true, that this will be their homeland.”

“It’s a fact. History is the witness, “said Subhash.

Assuming their state of intoxication, ladies asked from the kitchen “Shall we start serving dinner now?”

“Just about fifteen minutes. Only to pour the last one,” said Bha Ji.

“What about you? After retirement, would you like to return or to stay here with children?” I could not help asking.

“Well to me, it seems more people like us and you, in near future, will make UK their homeland, and we are no exception. Of course, we also, are going to live and die here,”

“Bha Ji, but, what will happen to your agricultural land, and that beautiful house?” I asked worriedly.

“There, what ever we have made or possess, shall remain for you and your family. That home will be no more than a holiday home for us, and who knows if one day, you too, decided to settle here, then, God knows who will benefit from our house and land!”

Person residing inside Bha Ji made me very emotional. My eyes watered with reverence. Simultaneously, a sense of meanness pleased me inside as if I have won a lottery.

Dinner was being laid on the table. So much was running in my mind. The very generous nature and lively attitude of Bha Ji, my elder brother, made me wonder beyond expectations.

Chapter 2: **Old Fashioned**

When the policeman pasted the label 'old fashioned' on Malkiat, he stared at him surprisingly, observing the superficial smile of the policeman.

He remembered that last year, the head teacher Mr Right had pasted the similar label on him. Caught in despair, he had tried to explain Mr Right that he was not an old-fashioned at all; nor his wife. They appreciate modern views with secular and rational thinking. And then, he had only said this much, "Look! Mr Right, all I say is that children should have some values too, along with academic achievements."

"What values?" Mr Right had looked askance through his glasses.

"Some values to make them good citizens and an understanding and appreciation of diverse cultures. Such values are essential for a multicultural society, values of mutual understanding, tolerance, love and respect, not denigrating and making fun of each other's culture. After all, it's the duty of the schools to instil timeless values in students. The responsibility of the schools is even greater in this respect, when the newly arrived parents are not able to spare enough time, being in the race of work and employment, to meet their domestic needs," saying this like lodging a complaint, Malkiat expressed his sentiments.

After keeping quite for a moment, Mr Right replied gently, "You may be right to some extent, but the life of the children is their own and independent of course, no longer they are small children, they are grown ups and able to take their own decisions. Secondly, you are no longer in India, and simply are causing confusion for them."

To Malkiat, Mr Right's views seemed, bit one sided. Grumblingly, he said, "I may be wrong, but still differ and think that's why children do not respect their teachers, and parents at home; and seniors at public and work places,." observing the muteness of Mr Right, he further dared, "A person has already been reduced to a mere machine tool and more over, the selfish thinking of this future nation can cause to turn our sweet homes into houses or hotel like rooms only. The sentiments of compassion, love, respect and care are essential for a healthy family or society," thus having given vent to his thoughts, Malkiat had returned home that day.

Though Malkiat was an ordinary worker, yet he was too, an educated person. On his way home from school, he had been thinking about a lot of things. Then he started thinking how the other devils were concerned with his children; if he does not think of them, who else will? Mr Right has nothing to do with such things, all he is concerned about his job, in other words, his salary. His name should have been, in fact, Mr Wrong instead of Mr Right.

"Never mind, one day when society will loose respect and tolerance; murderous fury will take it's place, then people like Mr Right would understand why home is the first and foremost educational institution for children. Teenagers may start killing each other; gang culture can spread over our streets. Perhaps, then it will be too late to eradicate the root causes of such problems." He kept thinking as he was addressing to himself.

When he approached his house, his neighbour was washing his car and today, he did not even feel saying 'hello' to him.

But this happened about a year ago, and was entirely a different story. At that time, he had felt a sense of a sort of victory. But today, like a beaten and defeated man, he went on thinking, sitting quietly in a state of despondency. Instead of a head teacher, he was facing a policeman.

It was nothing serious but now, it had been magnified beyond measure. He was very astonished and in this situation, even making an assessment, seemed to him an impossible task.

.....The night was passing at its usual pace and the atmosphere at home was very quiet. Every article lying in the room seemed so gloomy. He and his wife, lying in their beds seemed to be quite lifeless, just like dead bodies. They were lying awake yet seeing terrible dreams. They were feeling as if the brick walls of their house were changing into glass. The house of glass can crack at any time....and then....the tragedy of a cracked house got projected on the screen of their minds. Because of this reaction, sleep was blotted out of the night.

Many a time, Malkiat felt as if he were moving about wearing garments of glass too. God knows when and how, he may stumble and become naked. Then he would think even otherwise, such garments do not cover one's nakedness.

He realized as if some unexpected accident had happened to them. He remembered every step of the journey up to the date, and then looked back into the days when, in India, living in a simple house, they used to join the warmth of lukewarm sunshine of the winter. And today.....the desire for a better and more prosper life had yielded nothing, but the depression of the cold house of glass.

A sufficient portion of the night had elapsed. The extreme cold weather was accompanied by a furiously raging storm. The shrieking storm was knocking at the windows of their bedroom. A similar storm was raging inside both of them, the sound of which only they could hear.

After a while, Malkiat, started feeling a sort of cold. God knows, whether the temperature on account of increasing cold outside, or his own blood had started cooling down. They heard the sound of a barking dog from a house, few doors away. It was not the barking of the dog; it was the sound of its wailing. Perhaps, he too was crying due to the cold. He, too, felt like weeping. But how can he do so? He was making every effort to stop the clouds of his depression and helplessness, from condensing into tears.

He could not cry freely and aloud, like his wife, Suprit or like that dog. He was overwhelmed by the desire of giving a proof of his being a man. When everything is available to him, at what privation or deprivation should he cry? Where is the excuse for it? When there is no scarcity or want? He had a beautiful house, and excellent car and a profitable business.

It has been more than two decades since he came to England. He had come here to earn money and to make the life more prosperous; to be called a well-off and a respectable

person, in his village back home. There is no doubt that he has earned a lot of money. He has purchased fifteen acres of land, back home at a black market rate. He had got a well furnished newly built bungalow, beside the circular road of his village. And now, since he had lost his service, his shop was running well, and he considered himself not less than any king. As soon as his son reached his height, he bought him a new car. Now they were having golden dreams of handing over the business to his son and making regular trips to India.

Malkiat's son was admired by everyone. He was, as good as gold, who was extremely obedient. But call it the irony of the fate, the same boy took no time in changing. No one is to blame except his company. Suddenly, he became a stranger to his parents and got married to a white girl, quitting his parental home. No parental consul proved effective. They entreated him hard, but all in vain. Having come to England for a better future financially, they lost their offspring. But it was no use regretting it now, and both of them, openly and honestly admitted that it was their own fault as they could not spare enough time for their children.

From the chirping of the sparrows, he guessed the day was about to dawn. He had passed the entire night awake and in distress. He turned his side very gently, least Surjit who had gone to sleep, after taking sleeping pills, should wake up. He gently got out of his bed and came down in the lounge. The central heating running on time switch had now warmed up the house.

Willy-nilly, he rang the police in a state of great despair and begged for help to search for his daughter and in addition, he requested them to keep the matter secret.

It must be about ten o' clock in the morning. They had just finished their cup of tea when a police car halted in front of their door. Coming of the police in uniform, in this way, deeply pinched them as if they had wanted deliberately, to humiliate them in their local fraternity.

After writing the report and putting two photographs of Renu in their file, one of the policemen said to Malkiat, "look here, Mr Singh you need not worry so much on this account. She is over sixteen and entitled to take her own decisions. Like everybody else, she has a right to live according to her choice..."

Malkiat was enraged and interrupting the policeman, said "Sir, are you not able to appreciate a small request of mine? I do not like your policy about children of 'do what you like'; to you, it may be a very ordinary matter but for us, it is a question of not one life, but many lives. It is a question of the future and honour of the whole family. For God's sake.....it is a matter of one's prestige and some timeless values are always vital, no matter it is India, America or any other land."

Before Malkiat could have his complete say, the policeman interrupted "You must give liberty to your children in accordance with the lifestyle of this country. You should not be so old fashioned. Your statements are merely childish and ridiculous"

Malkiat felt like giving a forceful slap on the face of that constable who was sitting in front of him, and do away with the cunning smile on his lips. But he could never materialise his anger; he was not in a position to do so.

....The policeman got up and went away but he did notice the fire of anger and desperation raging inside Malkiat, and by pretending ignorance, he added fuel to the fire.

Malkiat did not realise when his wrathfully raised slap struck his own face.

For a long time, he kept contemplating over the phrases, 'old fashioned'; another word for an 'old fool'.

Then he stood up vigorously uttering 'Nothing to worry about man, everything would be alright; consider both sides equally and positively, and never ever accept a defeat. Life is full of challenges, and one needs confidence and determination to face them. Learn to change with the time without losing timeless values. "

He walked through his rear door into the back garden and stretched himself raising both arms as if he were trying to throw away his despondency, like an old shirt from his body to wear a new one.

Chapter 3: **Dissatisfied with Life**

A rat-race is on to escape scarcities, from the villages to the cities, from the cities to the wilderness, from separation to union, from a mirage to reality, and from reality to reveries.

Life can be bliss or a curse, or as you make it!
Different people have different circumstances. Some have privileges and some have miseries.

What a race it is! The more I try to speed to pursue the time, the more it has been rushing far away from me. Where will this race end? I wonder. But I have still not ceased seeing dreams. Whereas, they involve me in aimless wandering, they also lend me courage to struggle. I join this race again with zeal and fondness. The entire city is rushing, some are moving ahead while others lagging behind. This is the destiny as well as the culture of this metropolis

Few years earlier, when Malkiat Singh had returned from England and invited us for a dinner, after having some beer, I exposed my heart to him if he could help me somehow, in order to get me settle in England. At that time, he advised me clearly and honestly, “You know this much that, there is no voucher system anymore and hence, only one option is left for you. I will find out if there is any girl desirable to find a life partner from India. But, these days, there are very rare chances as lifestyles in India and UK differ. You would be lucky enough to find a divorcee. “

He further added “Carry on your study and focus on it. You may find a good job here in India.”

Hesitantly, I had told him that my father can hardly afford to pay my fees. Hearing this much, this God like man had helped me with five thousand rupees. By the grace of that fellow, I have achieved my degree. Five thousand of that time is worth a lot these days.

Our homes are opposite to each other. They are farmers and we are tailors, yet, they have been treating us like a part of their own family.

Scuffling with life, I have partially known some of its secrets. But this life is so complex that to me, many of its secrets are still mysteries. Life may be just an enigma.

It was years since I have been exploiting my thoughts. But still, I have not been able to come out of the shell of my inner loneliness. It seems hard to live, taking life for a dictate of the fate. What Dalbir had said, comes to my mind. He said that loneliness is not in the house or in the room; it is inside man's mind and of course, there must be some remedy for it.

Staying in the village, whenever I happened to visit a city, I wanted wistfully to own a place in it. I don't know why the city had attracted me so madly towards it. Now, though I have known a bit of this 'why', but for me, certain things are still a mystery. After having lived in this metropolis for so many years, I have started feeling as though I

had been looking for fragrance in paper-flowers, mistaken for fresh and blooming roses. Even still, this misconception of mine has not fully phased out of my mind.

Now, many a time, I yearn for the simplicity of rural life. This, too, perhaps may be a miscalculation of mine. Taking an example of my village or any other, the villages also seem to have changed. There is nothing like its previous self. Undoubtedly, the village has undergone a change; in form, size, sensibility, communication, imitation and in conduct.

Earlier, whenever a letter arrived from my village, it cheered me a lot. Now many a time, that sort of delight seems to be tinged with anxiety. This life is very strange! A journey terminating in maze, a hope dawns with the sunlight but again with the gloom, a state of despondency hangs heavy. At what time, the life might take what turn, no one knows despite all knowledge. Very baffling is this life.

That particular day, was perhaps the most auspicious day for us. After much ado, I had got a letter of appointment. I had gone through that letter time and again. I found it hard to believe that I had actually got the job. My mother distributed sweets in the neighbourhood and my father was sauntering, like an inebriated man. In the evening at last, my father's friends made him fetch two bottles of whiskey.

At the time of my departure from home, Kehar Singh had said to my father, "Mr daulat Ram, you have turned out to be comparatively fortunate. The fees paid for the education of your son have borne fruit. Now you need not strive against the sewing machine, your son has become an engineer".

My mother was beside herself on hearing the word 'engineer'. That night, nobody could sleep due to excitement caused by this delight. It was past midnight. Sometimes the sound of mother's coughing was audible. Like me, she, too, must be lying awake reflecting upon something. The snores of father were not being heard which clearly showed that, he, too, was lying awake.

Ghugga and Rano went to sleep, being young. I, too, while lying in my bed was cherishing the visions of starting my new life in the metropolis. The delight of my employment was getting the better of my entire family's sleep.

While seeing me off at Jalandhar railway station, father flashed in his face more of gratification of a hope, than a feeling of despondency or separation. But departing from the village, mother's face no doubt, had become somewhat disconcerted. The very nature of a mother's heart is such.

My elder brother had set up a separate home, immediately after his marriage and started working as a tailor, at the Marvaha Cloth House in Jalandhar. Now the parents had pinned all hopes on me alone. That is why perhaps they were in no hurry for my marriage, as they had been for that of my elder brother.

It was now a long time since I had been living in this metropolitan city. Many of my dreams had been realized and many were yet unfulfilled. I don't have the same zeal as I had, to stay and live in the city at the time of my arrival here. There was one silver lining that I got a flat, though it comprised only one bed room. When I return from my

job, I have the feeling of a home. I wish there had been somebody to answer my knock at the door. Sometimes, I do feel peeved at something like being alone. If some friend or companion joins, my leisure gets wings.

Some young men, from well-off families work with me. They are not obliged to save or economise as I am. They live and enjoy themselves as they like. But I can't emulate them. I am obliged to send home something or else.

I am now acquainted with many people in this city. I know them and they know me as well. They know me only superficially and are unaware of my inner self. Only a young man, Satish, hailing from a place near Karnal, knows me entirely, inside out. We have similar circumstances and backgrounds. He too, was born and brought up in a village. It is long, since our acquaintance developed into a close friendship. Many a time, an emotional gratification is provided in this city, just by a smile from Kamal Preet.

I had gone to sleep late at night. I was free from anxiety to get up early, it being a day off. Outside, there was a broad sunshine; yet, I felt like keeping lying in bed. While lying, my imagination wandered far and wide. Living in this metropolis, I am roaming about in the streets of my village. Sometimes, it seems very pleasing to get lost in daydreams. What a creativity of the mind! It's like seeing a film, without costing any money.

It is entirely a different world, very different, from the simple farming village life. The town is sleepy and dozing, still obliged to run. The race continues, through all day and night. Somebody had a fall while another, falls somebody else, just to forge ahead. The whole town dreams to advance, to flourish and to win and shine.

The scarcities of my family, back home seemed to contend with my desires and aspirations. Small worries of my parents recoiled on me, and sometimes, I felt depressed on thinking of wishful dreams, of my younger brother and sister. I had left my home hundred of miles away, yet the worries on account of wants and wishes of the family, always moved parallel to me. Where ever I went, they stared me in the face.

After having a quick wash, I put water on the gas stove for tea. A new family coming from Simla, has occupied the flat in front. Their youthful daughter, standing in the balcony is combing her hair. How lovely looking she is! Looking at me, she has also flashed a faint smile. This small occurrence causes a strange bloom and sensation, inside me.

My thoughts begin to proliferate. In my reflections, I start day dreaming. A pretty lady brings a bowl of tasty food, and places before my father. As he observes a good serving like rich families, his face flushes up. Hearing the sound of boiling, I hasten towards the kitchen. The tea has boiled up and reached the burning stove below. Now, I think of adding more water or making do, with this about half a cup.

A letter has arrived from the village. My mother has got it written by Rano, my sister. After statements of general well being and formal talks, the mother has got it written like a will. "My son, you have purchased your own house in the city and we are greatly

pleased to know it. Here, we have celebrated it, by inviting neighbourhood people over a tea party. Some say, it is very hard to maintain a house in big cities though you should have purchased as per your need. The days of winter are at hand. You have made no mention of leave. I have got a quilt stuffed for you with ample cotton. This time, you must take along, two thick sheets, bed covers and pillows, as well. You should have no worry on our account. It is three days since the buffalo was delivered. Heating of the milk, reminded me that my son was very fond of this very sweet thick milk.

After pursuing the letter, I sit in the balcony. But my imagination travels towards my village left back in Panjab. Mother is getting the cotton carded at Lakhi's workshop. Sarpanch is making my father take the measurement for his shirt. Rano is playing with other girls in the street. Ghugga is watching the boys play cricket outside the circular road. The girl from the balcony in front sneezes aloud and I come back from my village to my flat. I feel as if she had done it on purpose, merely to draw my attention. I start staring at her with a rapt focus. Perhaps, I was searching the image of Taro, in her. I felt as if such thoughts were tying knots inside me. I didn't know what to do and where to go. Though a bright sunshine was blazing outside, my mind was overshadowed by clouds of despondence.

Day is followed by night and night by day, and time is being consumed by this very cycle. And it is nearly ten o'clock of the night. The firmament of the city seems somewhat different from the rural sky, giving out a brownish tinge, instead of bluish. The village has its own natural charm, beauty and colours. At night, the stars twinkle in the blue sky featuring a fantasy.

I have spent a number of years, recalling the village and thinking about my home, therein. I remember the house not only made of mere bricks, but also the relationship connected with it. The dreams which I had entertained for this city seem to have been lost, somewhere on its roads.

An employment can't be abandoned, the question of resigning a job does not arise; one can't pull on without a job. The circumstances of the farmers may be different, but they also, seem to be hailing for foreign lands for better life. Mother is asking about my marriage, while the thought of Rano's marriage is already hanging heavy in my mind. There is no worry on the account of Ghugga. He will manage his affairs, but so far as the younger sister is concerned, it is I, who has to think of her marriage. Father's eyesight has been impaired and he is now unfit for tailoring. I shall be able to think of my marriage, only after Rano is married off.

Sometimes, I also think of procuring a two bedroom flat at a suitable location. In that case, my parents also can stay with us; my wife too, will serve somewhere in this city. Perhaps, Kamal Preet.....a dream seems to be destined to remain a dream. But no! I will realise it. The people have purchased their flats; can I not rent one? Some day, I must buy it. The vegetable vendor below has hawked. I get downstairs to fetch the vegetables. This is the annoyance hiring a flat on third floor. Either one should take a flat on the ground floor; if it is in a tower block, a lift should be there for convenience. Descending from the third floor and then, ascending back for petty chores, does not sound nice. It is

manageable by a young person like me, but very hard for the elderly. For this reason, perhaps, Dutta Babu dangles down his milk pot with a chord, and later pulls it up as if drawing a bucket of water from a village well.

Even though, I have nothing to do today, I don't feel like going out. After all, where can I go? Sometimes, for a couple of hours, I think of going to the park for a stroll. The problem is how to kill time. If I invite any friend, obviously, some expenditure will have to be incurred. Won't it be better to go to a film? Whilst sitting amongst the audience, I won't be conscious of lonesomeness. But even surrounded by a crowd, one can still feel lonely. After having a cup of tea, I shall think what to do. I come with a cup of tea and sit in the balcony.

Enveloped in the gloom of depression, I am sitting speechless. I see a single ray of hope and the name of that ray is Kamal Preet. She also travels in the same bus as I do. Many a time, we sit side by side. Thereafter, we have developed not only formal acquaintance; she has also started taking interest in me. If I ask her to accompany me to the theatre, perhaps she may agree; and now of course, she may even agree to come to my place. But the people in the lower flat keep an eye out on, who comes and goes. The day Dalbir brought Ritu along, the old woman had casually said to the neighbouring people, "well, these boys bring along girls." Somebody might ask her how it affects her. These are personal affairs of the people; let anybody bring any person to their house. After all, this is not a village.

Whilst strolling in the park, I have spent well two or three hours. I have not incurred any expense either. I have come across many people and have had a relaxing walk too. Only this was my purpose and now, I am feeling hungry. The vegetable curry is already cooked and in no time, I will bake two chapattis. Thinking this, I move towards the kitchen.

I rule my own house, then why should I suffer depression or a sense of solitude? I am still fortunate to have a roof over my head as there are so many people in the city, who are obliged to live in huts. If not home, let it be a house, and one day I will try to change it into a home. Whenever I think of inhabiting the house, I can't help heaving a sigh, recalling the home left behind in my village. What can I do with these memories? When I move towards the future, the memories of the past, become an obstacle in my way?

Diwali is only fifteen days away. This year, I shall too, celebrate with my family back home. I have already purchased a watch for my father which seems costly, to look at. For once, the father will beside himself. Last time, I had not been able to purchase any such thing. For my mother also this time, I will purchase gold bangles. She will not be tired of blessing me but, will also keep saying, "My son, why should you have spent so much?" Inside, she will be very delighted wearing them. She will at once go to Bishni's home to show them. For me, so much generosity is not yet advisable. I need to get ornaments made for Rano's marriage, before thinking about mother. For the mother this time, only a warm blanket and a suit are sufficient. For Ghugga, I shall purchase a warm jacket or material for a warm suit, like the one for the mother. If father's eyesight had continued

to be normal, he himself would have stitched the suits. Rare must be an expert tailor, like him in the whole village!

When I think about my elder brother, I get caught in double mindedness. He has done nothing for the joint family. He has set up a separate home, immediately after his marriage. He is enjoying himself, within his family that includes none, but his own wife and children. Brothers, sisters and parents have these days, been excluded from the circle of a family. It is also nothing to surprise as the joint family system is breaking up, because of transformation. My parents, too, have never talked ill of him. Nor has anybody else, ever blamed him. They have never pinned any hope on him, though they may expect some golden ornament from him on Rano's marriage. The expectations of everyone are attached to mainly me, alone, since I go on fulfilling them. The more I come up to their expectations, the greater they increase. But at length, I have to think about myself, too. After all I, too, have aspirations in life, which crave for fulfilment.

Many a times, I feel like writing all these things to my mother. Now the telephone has reached our village and I shall encourage them to get a connection. Over the phone, it is more appropriate to touch the subject of Kamal Preet. Nurpur, too is not very far away from our village. The distance between may be six or seven miles. I shall write that she is the niece of Satinder Singh of Nurpur, and she is working in the State Bank.

It is late in the night. Lying in bed I am again caught in the same brooding. Sometimes, it seems that my thinking is confined to reflections alone. After the marriage, we too, are not going to print our own currency notes! God knows! when Ghugga will get a job. Father is no more fit enough to earn. Day by day, inflation is going up and up. Look at this Dutta Babu, he has a small job yet, there are all amenities like good furniture, tv, video, refrigerator, cooler and gas cooker etc. in his flat. They say his daughter also is a teacher in a dance school. What should these schools be paying! Life has trampled poor Dutta Babu.

Sometimes, I feel as my house back in the village, is swallowing my dream of my new house. But no, I should not entertain such ideas of mere meanness. Better I should keep my name out of the list of selfish people.

Today, for the entire day, I have been in low spirits. What can I tell anyone? Repeatedly on Mr Pandey's asking, I shared all my feelings with him. He said that it was simply a trivial matter. It may be for him, but for me, it is of importance. He has no dependents and has to worry about himself alone. He has nothing to do with rising inflation.

.....I could have caught the first bus that I deliberately missed. I am feeling anxious to share my sentiments with Kamal Preet. She has not reached yet. I fear lest she should have gone by the earlier one. This is possible, she, too, may not be coming today. If I ring her, don't know who picks up the receiver! In that situation, what shall I say! Her family members shouldn't know as yet about our intimacy. I wait for the next bus, she might come bit late.

I am feeling bit worried on account of Kamal Preet. Today, I have delayed my arrival at home for nothing. On Saturday, she was complaining of headache. I open the door and find a letter lying on the floor. The handwriting seems to be that of Rano. Ghugga rarely carries out a bid. Father has got it written, "my son you know that during the rainy season, the roof of the main hall had collapsed. Thank God, no one has been buried in the rubble. If you can manage to send forty or fifty thousand and the rest ten-fifteen, we can search from other sources. Now this task seems more urgent than Rano's marriage. Secondly, it is better to let her finish teacher training course before her marriage. The time, too, have changed and....."

I place the letter on the table. On reading this letter, I am feeling enraged. Whether I am angry at myself or at father, and other family members! I am staring at this question mark. To ring up Kamal Preet, this thought comes to my mind, but at the same time, a sense of reluctance starts travelling parallel.

I can't explain why at home, I am feeling suffocated. Just from outside, I have returned home. Presently, I don't even feel like changing and washing. I start strolling in the balcony in vain. Thereafter, I descend down. On main road, there is a crowding of wheelbarrow stalls. The ladies are busy buying vegetables and salads. I go ahead and turn right. On the other side of the road, I see a sign board of a liquor shop. I say to myself that today, I will waste some money. After buying half a bottle of whiskey, I ring up Dalbir, in order to invite him.

I buy few things like radish, spring onions and cucumber to prepare salad. I start walking homeward and see Dutta Babu's daughter leaving for the dancing school. On seeing her, some women are turning up their noses. She usually returns after midnight or sometimes, early morning. Why these dancing schools only open at night time? Why not during the day? Wondering and following this question, I reach home.

Dalbir arrives, and we peel and cut the salad while engaged in dialogue. I fetch some ice and start pouring whiskey in glasses. While sipping whiskey, I say to Dalbir, "By your coming, now this place gets a gala atmosphere. I was really feeling lonely and depressed, don't know why?"

After finishing my peg, I read out that letter to him After this person, Dalbir, I have come across Kamal alone with whom I can share my innermost feelings. In this city, vast like an ocean, there are only two persons who have started knowing me inside-out.

"I want to tell you something else," I draw Dalbir's attention towards myself.

"When I told this to Mr Pandey, he started imposing on me his own philosophy."

He says, "This responsibility of looking after parents, breaks one's back. It can be really heavy. How long can you bear it? "

"Then, what did you say to him? Dalbir asked me inquisitively.

"I don't like his ideas actually....."

"You should not like it either. In fact, his world is different from ours" saying this, he becomes serious.

“My father has only produced and brought up four children. The house too, had been built by our grandfather. He had worked as a tailor for English families at Simla.” the bitterness inside me gets a voice.

“Sometimes, I approve of what Pandey says. He is right that I single-handedly, cannot bear all this. My other brothers are also supposed to share it. They too, are like me.”

“This is the difference that’s there. They are not like you. And of course, you are not like them, too. They are made of a different stuff. If life is a struggle, then why should one fear it? You have to be strong enough to bear this alone. I too, am in the same boat.”

There is a challenge in what Dalbir says and I have started feeling that my limitations are giving way to my duties.

After finishing the third peg, we start arranging for the dinner.

Soon after dinner, Dalbir departs. I am not alone as before, and now, I have no grievances against life at all. I was feeling dissatisfied with life, but not now!

Chapter 4: **An Eye Witness**

Second time, I had visited England on account of the wedding of Subhash's son. I met a lady from Pakistan who was also on a short visit. Most of the time, she became focus of my attention as she resembled a lot with Shazya. Staring at her, I had thought that she could be a cousin of Shazya, and I laughed within myself at my silly thought.

That night, my thoughts had been playing with horrible memories of the past. My innocent childhood and the time I had spent with Shazya, visualized on the screen of my mind like the scenes in a film. I simply can't help forget all that. More than half a century had elapsed, yet the picture of Shazya fixed in the frame of my memories, had not been bedimmed.

Pursuing these memories, I am able to see some horrible incidents of innocent life scattered before me.

Meetu was said to be a ruffian in the whole village. He was a very handsome, young and stout. He had a fair complexion and was six feet tall. He was considered to be a fortunate enough to consume dairy products at home. All the people were afraid of him. On the day he died of a snake bite, our whole family was wailing and crying but I alone, watching his dead body from the roof, was feeling happy in my heart of hearts.

I often think that in my childhood and also now, people of similar age of mine were and are still much more clever and shrewd than me, in worldly manipulations. Let people think of me as they like, for being simple or straight. I am not the one like them. While strolling about, physically they see things, but do not feel like me. They flee from the sufferings, in order to cherish joys. Unlike them, surrounded by miseries, I make my life worth living. This knack, I had picked up when I was hardly six or seven years old.

There was a big mango tree in the courtyard of our house and in the rainy season, it was laden with sweet mangoes. The girls from neighbourhood not only used to eat its fruits but also hanged their swings. Along with old women doing little domestic chores, they added cheer to the courtyard. Some of them would ply the spinning wheel making balls of the cotton thread. While making tassels of thread, young girls cut jokes with one another, and also gratified their urge to backbite.

In the opposite house in a corner, they had a small plum tree. No other tree in the courtyard. In the winter season, women assembled there to ply spinning wheel or to bask in the sun. It was a common courtyard of three brothers, but it seemed as if it were a common property of the whole street. Both, Nurdin and Khushia who were elder brothers of Amroo, ran an oil mill. Adjacent to the oil mill, they had a fold where they kept two buffaloes and a cow for dairy products. Their younger brother Amroo and his wife, worked as a tailor. They catered to the needs of our village, as well as of the neighbouring one.

Sartaj, son of Nurdin was very fond of catching quails. His sister Nadira was of my age. For the entire day, we played and ate together in each other's house, wherever we

happened to be. Up to the age of seven, I used to go to play with Nadira. Her mother, Fatima had a very good equation with my mum. Aunt Fatima knew a bit of midwifery as well. She was also called in if some woman got a spasm and needed message.

May it be the fair of Peer or Baisakhi, Ramadan or Dusehra, everybody participated equally.

About a couple of miles from our village, celebration of Dusehra was held at Bundala. Being slightly ill-disposed, my mother wasn't going. Nadira and me, both of us had been advised to stay at home. Aunt Fatima said that the previous year Nadira had got tired and she was obliged to carry her. But I, through my stubbornness, went to the fair leaving poor Nadira weeping behind. Uncle Nurdin's son Sartaj, my aunty, Amroo's wife, aunty Karmo, Shazya and me, joined others and trod the way like a caravan. My mother had given some change which Shazya had tied in one corner of her veil. For about more than a mile, I fondly walked ahead of every body and then started lagging behind. Aunt Karmo had shouted Sartaj, "Do pick up the boy for a while, poor fellow, seems to have got exhausted." But enjoying the company of his mates, he paid no heed and remained unconcerned.

When the big idol of Ravana became visible, Shazya said, "Pali, look at that huge idol of Ravana, we are not very far now. Let me carry you for a little distance."

First, she carried me on her hip and then held me against her bosom for a short distance. I put both my arms around her neck. She pressed and squeezed me a little and then, gently pinched me on the back. She put her hands under my arm pits and pushing me a bit away, she looked into my eyes mischievously. "You are not a small boy, you have to walk now", she said smilingly lowering me down.

On the return journey, Sartaj carried me for some distance and then aunty Karmo. I had been roaming in the fair nearly half a day. I don't know why, instead of Karmo, I wished that Shazya would carry me once more. While travelling from the village early afternoon, when Shazya carried me, a cosy touch of her body had given me a strange sensation. An inexpressible Only I could realise this. May be, that's why I never ever dared to share it with anyone else.

These were the days of advancing winter. I was having symptoms of bad cold. My mother had given me a maize chapatti, along with pulse of black beans which was leavened lavishly with fresh butter. I didn't like it very much. May be my taste had been spoiled on account of fever. I could hardly eat half a it. Fatma and my mother, before setting out to get cotton carded, had shouted to Shazya, "Look here girl, we are going and in our absence, do look after Pali."

My mother had laid a cot spreading a sheet on it in the sun. I was sitting on it pulling half the quilt on my legs. I did feel like going to play in the street but my mother had forbidden it, lest I should get fever again.

As Shazya entered our courtyard, she immediately sat beside me and asked, "Are you all right? "

"Only a slight headache, "I had answered that much.

She had put my head on her thighs and started pressing gently. Then hearing the voice of Nadira she said, "Let me fetch Nadira to give you company to play with."

As she got up to leave, I held her hand firmly. I had also dared to tell her that I liked her company than Nadira's. Looking at me, she laughed gently holding a mysterious smile in her eyes, and then lay down by my side pulling over the quilt. A sense of soft touch and warmth produced a tremor like feeling in my body. I wished I kept lying like that and Shazya kept soothing me in that manner. I felt that my ailment lead to comfort through Shazya. I realised a stream of energy softly flowing from her body into mine, and I was recovering. That's all I can say!

Nadira was my age mate and Shazya was senior to me, by seven or eight years. Yet, I don't know why I wished that Nadira should keep away, whenever Shazya was with me.

When the mustard crop was harvested, all the oil seeds were collected in Karmo's courtyard. There was always a sort of commotion. One day, Sartaj filled a gunny bag with oil seeds to get oil extracted, then, Nadira and I too, followed him to see how oil is squeezed out of seeds. My mother and Karmo, never entertained any barrier in eating or drinking. We used to eat food cooked in either house, without any discrimination. Many a time, I remember, we were disallowed to eat meat cooked in Raulan's house. I don't know, why? They were also Muslims just like Karmo and others!

Niaz, a rice offering, we all used to eat. Sometimes, fresh vegetables and salads grown by Arayeens, were delivered to us and in return, my mother also sent sugar canes, corn cobs, curds or buttermilk etc. Whenever uncle Amroo prepared meat, he never forgot to send some for my father as he was fond of it.

I have never, afterwards, seen such a social integration as it used to be at that time. Limited needs and a simple life! Do the routine work, feed yourself and go to bed to get ready for the next day. More or less like domestic cattle, stress free, but not completely worriless. Life was, as if it only needed that much. No one had the knowledge of what was happening in the rest of the world. No roads, no radios or newspapers! It was completely a peasant rural culture; simple, sweet, natural, loving, innocent, heavenly yet, bitter and barbaric. For everybody, this rural world was roughly confined within the radius of twenty to forty miles, from their own village.

Hot winds had been blowing this year in May and June and the earth seemed to be parched, still life was so careless that we used to play barefoot, at noon time.

The rainy season set in and was extremely troublesome. Outside the village, banyan trees kept yearning for the swings and songs of young girls, but it seemed as if village damsels had forgotten the swings, and lost festive feelings of 'teean'. Both in young and

old, hearing the gossip like conversation at home and in streets, the desire to play and sing seemed to have been exhausted.

What is happening and why, nobody knows at all. Only seeing one another, the people are flaring up. With the dawning of every new day, people who used to meet each other like brothers, have suddenly started looking enemies. Rehmu was himself a Muslim but was obliged to beat the drum, at the roof of village gurdwara as a caution. He was announcing that Muslims had attacked from the east. Intermittently, beating the drum, he announced that the Muslims had invaded from the north as well, and on the eastern side, two nearby villages, mainly of Muslim habitants, had been looted and plundered.

When father and Meetu had joined the gang of invaders to rob the neighbouring villages, mother had brought all the women and children of Nurdin's family, to our house in order to protect them. I remember that for three nights, Shazya and others had slept at our home.

My grandfather had done his best to assure them, that as long as he was alive, nobody in the village could dare to cast an evil eye on them or their property. But they took his assurances to be a hollow consolation. Actually, in their heart of hearts, they were badly terrified and didn't consider it sensible to believe. My grandfather and wrestler Milkha Singh would keep sitting on the platform under the giant banyan tree, holding choppers in their hands. Instead of courtyards or streets, now people had started sleeping on their roof tops.

When two Sikh young men had abducted Sughan, the daughter of Raulan to their outer mansion, mother and aunty Karmo said to grandfather, "Not only men inhabit this village; women also do. Then why is it that men, alone are overpowered by contempt and hatred?" Perhaps, grandfather had no answer to this question. That's why he had left without uttering a single word. Almost five to seven other men were sitting there already, holding choppers and spears when grandfather rejoined them.

Even now, I have a very clear recollection of several such incidents and dreadful sights. Such riots, no doubt, may have taken place in earlier times, too, and perhaps, will continue to take place; because in the name of God, it is a very common practice to get people killed by lunatics. I have developed a great hatred for these riots. It seems that the entire world has been changed for me. From that time up to now, these pseudo-religious people seem to me an object of dislike. People engaged to participate in a game of bloodshed, can never be religious at all, in the true sense. They can only said to be opportunists, traitors and mean, nothing else.

Those Sikhs, who at that time, were planning and thinking of plundering the household goods of Nurdin, and of molesting Shazya, I feel ashamed to call them humans. And also those Muslims, who had severed one breast of Taro in the millet field, seem to me, disgrace the name of Allah. It reminds me the words of Mohammad Rafiq, he used to say, "Love is God and God is One, You may call this omnipotent Ram, Allah, Rabb, Krishna or Vaheguru, it does not matter. The creator of life is the One and only One. He is shapeless, changeless and timeless; yet Nature is changeable."

“If people be afraid of God, the schemes to plunder and slaughter, cannot be possibly hatched in the Sikh temple or in the mosque. I can’t understand why men have become so barbaric and brutal! They do not feel even the slightest fear of God,” sitting on my mother’s bed, aunty Karmo had been talking like this, and crying for a long time at night. For the last two days, Fatima, Gulabo, Nadira, Karmo and Shazya had been coming to sleep at our house. I had been cursing myself, since Shazya had gone out accompanied by me, since noon today. I thought that if I had been a grown up man, surely, I would have struck grandfather’s axe on the head of that maniac beast, Meetu.

At night, the rain became torrential and just because the rainwater was slanting towards the verandah, we had been obliged to lay two of our cots in the parlour. Since my cot and Shazya’s were in front of the window, the gust of breeze brought some occasional drops on us.

Suddenly, I heard a sound like that of sobs. I felt as if Shazya was crying secretly. I became curious to feel her face with my trembling hand. Her face and cheeks were drenched with tears. I also felt like weeping, and of course I was when Shazya softly wiped my tears, but this even made me cry aloud. That time mother had said, “Well boy, what has happened to you now?”

“He seems to have been terror stricken,” said aunty, Karmo.

The sound of rainwater falling through the roof spouts from outside was audible. Shazya put her arm around me, and embraced me tightly.

The next day, they had themselves, distributed their household goods to the people with whom they had better equation. They handed over some furniture and a buffalo to us. At that time, I was too young to think of this, but now I realize, how they could have felt while giving away their goods and with what courage, they would have obliged to abandon their native land.

In the afternoon, at the time of their departure, I had been able to ask only this much to Shazya, “Whither are you going?”

“Pakistan,” she had replied wailing.

“Where is this Pakistan?” this question died within me, before taking verbal form. I had held Shazya’s hand and cried bitterly.

Passing under the big mango tree, walking along the bank of the pond, they were going further and further away. My grandfather and a few other men of the village had accompanied them, to see them off across the river. When Shazya turned and looked towards me, I could not help bleating like a baby lamb. My mother pressed me hard towards herself. Early in the morning next day, I learnt from my grandfather that before reaching their camp, while crossing the river, Shazya had been swept away in the river.

The environment was charged with fear of plundering, slaughtering and molestation of young women and girls. Nobody had ever thought that they would become aliens in their own homeland.

Young girls were afraid of to go out for the call of nature, in the crops around the village. That’s why perhaps Shazya had taken me along, holding my hand that afternoon. She had gone inside the sugarcane field, asking me to stand on the bank. She had not gone

far away either, shortly after, I had seen Meetu entering from the side. Soon, a suppressed cry had been rendered mute. Meetu had pulled her a little further inside. Hearing the sound of a scuffle, I thought of informing aunty or mother. Then I started advancing to the place of the incident but, suddenly stopped. I do not know why? After a short while, Shazya had come out crying and holding an empty pot of water. Coming towards me, she only said this much, "Pali, for God's sake, do not tell this to anybody at home or outside. I nodded in assent.

I am an eye witness of this incident, if at that time, I had told anyone; I could have said only that Meetu had held Shazya and beaten her severely. But after growing up a little, I had soon realized that Shazya had been raped.

Now I think that the river had not drowned Shazya; she had drowned herself in the overflowing river. And being an eye witness, I can assure of this fact.

Chapter 5: **Across the Breakwater**

When Bha ji had given me this bad news, about the death of Bhushan's wife, I was overwhelmed by a sudden emotional stress. His wife, Krishna was really a great person. During my second visit, I had been invited three times to their house, along with Bha ji and his family.

Apart from consoling over the phone, nothing I could do about it. I kept thinking about Bhushan, his home life without his wife and his future! And for a long time, I had been thinking about his only daughter, Nikki. For her, a home can't be the same again, without a mother. No doubt, Bhushan loves her so much, yet, she will be yearning for motherly affection and warmth.

No one can fill the blankness of their innermost world.

Life and home!

How deeply these two words are interrelated! If there is a home, there is life. And if there is life, there is home. Actually, without home, there is no home life.

Like body and soul, these two words can't be free and independent of each other.

Isolated from each other, they are likely to lose their meanings.

'What a strange phenomenon the home is!' Bhushan went on thinking.

In order to live, a man badly needs a home. In fact, life is incomplete without it. He felt as if his home had been reduced just to four walls only. Merely a house, no longer a home! An innocent sigh escaped from his lips.

There are such homes that attract inhabitants from outside. After work, people long to return home. And for those who merely live in houses, situation can be just the reverse of it.

Time brings about many changes. It flows constantly like a river. And the life on its banks keeps changing like seasonal crops. Some of us are on one bank of this river called time, while others are across, on the other bank. Time waits for no one. It keeps elapsing unnoticed.

Bhushan had reared a dream of rehabilitation with the presence of Renu, the home that had devastated by his wife Krishna's death. But now, this dream seemed to be shattering.

After finishing the kitchen chores, Renu, instead of coming into the lounge, sat in a chair in the balcony. Sitting near the aquarium, Bhushan felt as if Renu deliberately wanted to sit away from him. It seemed to him as though Renu and he were two parallel lines that could never and at no point meet. By chance, his attention was attracted towards the gold fish.

Initially, this tank had several fish. But then only three golden ones were left alive. After a short while, two of them died and only this one survived. Bhushan had named it 'Soan

Pari' means golden elf.

Whenever he woke up in the morning, he felt tempted to see Soan Pari. He felt like observing how it moved about, whether it was sleeping or awake. But in no time, he lost interest in it, because day by day, Soan Pari followed the same routine. Bhushan fed it and after taking the feed, it went around the aquarium. Sometimes, it appeared well-off and at other times, it seemed as if it were to breathe its last.

There was a difference of twenty years, between the ages of Bhushan and Renu, and the former was fully conscious of it. He knew that it was like a gap of one generation. It was not a matter of physical relationship; a person's lifestyle, temperament, modes of life has also their importance.

When Renu had nothing to do, she would often sit near the window and look outside or at Soan Pari. The circle of her social interaction was very limited or she had deliberately kept it so. Otherwise also, she was a sort of woman of reticent nature.

Bhushan noticed that Renu had been gazing outside for a long time. He thought that she might be trying to look for the ebb and flow of life, in the crowd of people moving on the roads. But soon, when he observed from close quarters, he noticed that Renu was looking outside but seeing nothing, lost in some other world. She was just staring in the space, as though her open eyes were sightless.

Since Nikki had gone to university, Renu had appeared more depressed. Even though Nikki was the daughter of her elder sister, Renu has always considered her to be her own, a friend like daughter; a companion to express inner emotions.

Whenever, Bhushan thought honestly, he felt that he was responsible for ruining Renu's life. Compelled by his sisters, he remarried. His sisters had persuaded Renu's parents for the sake of Nikki's future. Bhushan was also in the know of the fact that Renu was in love with Ashok. At length, giving way to everybody's pressure, he had agreed to marry Renu, his younger sister-in-law, thinking himself to be guiltless in a way.

When in a society, countries like India, a daughter's marriage becomes a financial burden the parents seldom heed their daughter's choice, if they can marry her off without any cost. Compromises regarding daughter's marriages were common, and are still there in some rural communities. It is what had happened with Renu. Who would care to know what she wanted? No one ever cared for her emotions and choice. At that time, protests and anger had raised their heads inside her. Her sentiments had blazed in flames. Her thoughts had raged in storms. Her aspirations had wailed causing commotions in her mind. But now, all this had become a tale of her past-----regrets of the bygone times which sometimes, pursue the present.

Many a times, Bhushan felt that Renu and him, though residing under the same roof, were living apart, lonesome in their own respective worlds. He felt that their bedroom was partitioned with an invisible wall and occasionally, he saw images of Ashok's existence beyond this wall.

Whenever they felt a craving in their bodies or a heat in blood, sooner their hands advanced for physical contact, Renu would at once put off the light. On Renu's doing so, Bhushan felt as if Renu had hung a curtain between their bodies. Bhushan's thought of losing himself in the beautiful body of Renu, would change its course. His hands advanced for physical contact would retreat, and he would sink in sadness. He felt as though Renu were trying to seek Ashok, within from his body in darkness.

It was raining outside; not raining, just drizzling. While conversing, they felt their bodies to be steaming hot, as if they were slightly feverish with high temperature. It was like rising of a strange wave, producing tides. Soon the hand of Renu advanced towards the bed switch, the room was enveloped in darkness. The existence of visible articles in the room eliminated. Bhushan's hand stopped short while advancing to switch the light on again. Why? He didn't know! He disliked darkness, around him as well as inside him. That night very seriously, Bhushan had been thinking about Renu. He knew fully well, that Ashok still loves her. Perhaps that is why he had given Renu the freedom of correspondence and phone calls. By this liberty, Bhushan had risen in Renu's estimation.

One day, Renu threw out all the artificial plants and creepers, and replaced with real ones. In the grandeur of these plants, she was feeling a strange sort of delight. A sense of beauty and colours of natural environment had been created among concrete and plastic milieu. For a long time, sitting among these plants, she cherished a sense of gratification.

The following day, Bhushan, while sitting near the plants was struck by a question-----
Why should Renu has done it?

Having seen plants so placed in some house or having got tired of life within this confinement?

He would think that existence governed by a routine or habit was no life. It can be boring and changeless, as every night were a repetition of the previous evening and in the same way, every morning a repetition of the previous night.

When a person gets used to living in prison, the urge for a free life in him or her, starts fading out. After all, life is to be ravished and cherished, to love and to be loved, by establishing a bond of kinship with society. If Renu had not called him for the breakfast, God knows how long he would have remained lost in such reflections.

After the breakfast, he dropped wearily on to a chair close to the aquarium. The Soan Pari had gone about swimming from side to side, bottom to top, and then again, top to bottom. The round and black eyes of Soan Pari seemed to stare at him. For some time, he felt as if the fish yearned to get out of this limited circle and spread into the vastness of the open waters. The next moment, he felt as though it was happy and secure enough, in this aquarium only.

Bhushan had heartfelt compassion for Renu and wanted to see her happy, in every respect. He was always anxious, lest she should fall into depression. If he ever talked of consulting a doctor, Renu would retort, "What's wrong with me? Am I not a normal

person? I am happy and have nothing like depression. Why do you worry on my account, just for nothing?"

After Nikki had left for university, Bhushan had started trying to peep into Renu's mind. Renu's keeping suppressed and oppressed, was becoming unbearable for him, because his own happiness was also linked with that of her. He was quite sincere and honest about it. They were only a pair of creatures in this flat. For a long time now, the walls of this flat had not heard words, quivering with love and roars of laughter. If ever, some voice travelled into these walls, it was that of the television.

Occasionally, Bhushan thought of changing the environment. On some pretext or the other, he touched the subject of going on a holiday. To start with, Renu showed no interest. If at all, she went on a holiday; and on return, to Bhushan, she would appear more depressed and upset. He would try to probe what privation or deficiency made Renu unhappy, why she seemed quiet and depressed? This is the age to be cheerful, to enjoy life, to realize one's urges, and to deck and don. But, she is hardly fond of wearing jewellery, make up or fashionable garments. There must be, in this house, some sort of voidness which cannot be filled; or something, seems to have extinguished inside her. He would keep debating in his mind, lying in the bed.

It happened many a times that Bhushan wanted to watch some documentary, and Renu desired to see some sort of light entertainment. In such a situation, they would sit in different rooms, watching different channels. An internal bond between them would seem snapped. Bhushan was forbidden to consume fried and richly salted or spiced dishes, but on the contrary, Renu had no such restriction. Thus, dinning on the same table, they could not relish the same food. Many such small or you may call big things, had ceased to be common between them.

Many a times, Bhushan thought that it was necessary for a woman to be a mother. Without motherhood, a woman's life is incomplete. If Renu, he argued with himself, had an issue from her own womb, her life would have been different and happier, of course more gratified. But whenever he hinted at it, Renu replied, "What do you mean by my issue? Nikki too, is my daughter. I alone, am her mother. Why should I go about consulting doctors?"

The sun beams were adding to the sheen of the clean and polished leaves of the rubber plant. Looking towards the balcony, Bhushan noticed that Renu was sitting in the chair gazing outside. Then his attention was diverted towards the aquarium. The Soan Pari was swimming about in its usual routine. It held his attention for quite a long time. For a moment, he looked towards Renu and then, towards Soan Pari. "What's this life? Aimless and meaningless!" he thought in himself.

For a short while, he kept standing in the lounge, lost in himself and self-centred, seeming caught in some problem. He felt that he had been carrying some burden, on his mind for a long time and now, it was becoming unbearable for him and beyond. He wanted to arrive at some decision without any delay. He had resolved to throw away that

burden, somehow or the other, for the sake of his own peace of mind and of course for the betterment of Renu as well.

After sometime, he reoccupied his place and felt like setting the Soan Pari free. But, will it be able to bear the brunt of waves of the open water? It has been accustomed to living in this limited space. The chain of his thoughts continued. Possibly, it may feel frightened to start with. But then, going across the breakwater, it will adapt itself to the tides of waters and expend its entire energy to live and enjoy life, not just to maintain existence.

He had not much knowledge about the fish, yet he felt as if he had discovered the solution of his problem. Very fondly, he called Renu to himself. She came and sat closely, smilingly. For an instant, he looked into her eyes and then, his sight travelled across the lounge occupied with domestic articles. Renu was anxious to hear the words, to be uttered from his lips. But all the words, he had gathered with courage, suddenly slipped away from the fist of his thoughts. What had resolved upon, he could not say. Now, he was feeling as if he, himself, had been caught in the breakwater of the ocean of life.

Chapter 6: **How Long**

Knowingly or unknowingly, one can be mistaken. You never know, there are times, when one can be aware, while at other times, can be unaware! In some sort of dilemma, Bindu had taken a wrong step. It's a matter of sadness for all of us, as she is the only daughter of one of our cousins.

Bha ji, once told me that Bindu's mother, had taken a heavy dose of sleeping pills, distressingly to end her life.

Toeing the advice of Seema, a social worker, Bindu had made a mistake and now, seemed repenting. Now it cannot be undone! She felt that in haste, immaturity, she had acted wrongly.

After being separated, Bindu's attention was focused on Alka, her only daughter. Many a time, soon after her mother's divorce, Alka felt that the divorce of her parents had proved a sort of blessing for her. As long as the bad blood, between her father Joginder and mother Bindu had raged, nobody had paid much heed towards her. Quietly, she had suffered the pain of being neglected.

She would lay in her bed sobbing and sulking. It seemed that her parents were ignorant of her plight. Busy in their daily complications, they lost interest even in purchasing toys for her. The old toys which once, were the companions of Alka, were lying in a corner of the room sadly staring at her. Or perhaps, Alka deliberately, didn't care to cast a glance on those toys.

Now the mother and daughter slept in the same bed. Alka enjoyed a sense of warmth and affection from this physical closeness.

In the eyes of others, she was just a child, innocent and ignorant, unaware of worldly matters yet, she could understand and realise everything happening around her, she was able enough to understand things hidden under the cover of her pretence.

Before the divorce, Whenever Bindu and Joginder quarrelled, Alka quietly retired to her bedroom. Quite deeply, she felt depressed. She had a longing that someone should come and ask her about her quietness, but her parents simply thought that she was enjoying sleep. Who knows that sighs and sobs were telling sad tales of her dreams, buried beneath her pillow!

Being under-slept, she kept dozing during the day, and depressed and inattentive. She started disliking her school, and her class mates who made fun of her due to that, she felt all the more embarrassed. She kept quiet and would not tell anybody what she felt. It was her parents, who were responsible for her distress, not their innocent daughter to whose lot all the sufferings fell.

Sometimes, Alka within herself, felt as if she also were to blame. On that day, if she had not rung the police, the news of their trouble would never have reached Seema. She was all the more offended with Seema, who had advised instigating her mother to apply for divorce.

Seema Lodhi was working in East London as a social worker. She was more interested in engaging marriages of illegal immigrants rather than her professional duty.

Under the cover of social work, she was encouraging youngsters to involve in drugs and sexual activities. If she is likely to get into trouble, two police officers were there to help get her out. She arranged parties and dances under the banner 'social get together' for school and college students. Her group was well organised to sell drugs and sex. Time to time, she invited youngsters to the dance houses of West end. She seemed a sort of voluntary social worker, never seemed rightfully qualified professional. She never paid much attention towards her duties and responsibilities as a social worker.

When Alka's seventh birthday arrived, Bindu celebrated it with a great pump and show. On this very occasion, Alka was reminded of her father, and this was the day when for the first time, Deb had entered Bindu's life. This particular meeting also had been brought about by Seema. In the beginning, for a couple of times, Deb had come to their house accompanied by Seema. Gradually, he had started coming alone and frequently. Alka didn't like either Deb or Seema. She felt as if it was Seema, who had separated her mother and father for good. She didn't want anyone to come between her and her mother. That's why she hated Deb.

Probably Bindu too, had realized the fear occupying the mind of her daughter, Alka. But the temptation of starting a new life did not allow her to be cautious enough. Whenever, she tried to think seriously, the thought of Deb's company carried her unconsciously towards a dreamland, where the realities of life forbade her to enter.

Time kept marching on its own pace. Deb's visits to their house became more frequent. The days passed, weeks expired and in the same routine, many months slipped away! Deb and Bindu, during this while, had developed their intimacy to the extreme end. Now for Bindu, Deb was the only source of emotional satisfaction, on the other hand, for Alka, he was perhaps a cause of mere depression and distress.

Like the angles of a triangle, these, three persons were. Whenever Deb and Bindu tried to meet at some point, they were moving away from Alka and to her that was totally unacceptable. Alka still, considered her mother to be a part of her dad. Though, Deb brought new garments and costly toys for Alka, God knows, why all these articles failed to fascinate her.

Many a times, Bindu also felt as if she was depriving her daughter of her natural maternal rights. As she thought of this, her mind went to her paternal uncle. He was only thirty five when her wife died, leaving behind three children whom he had brought up as a mother, sacrificing his youth for the sake of his children. And she, being a woman,.....? For a moment, she felt ashamed and thought of extricating Deb from her life, just for the sake of her only daughter. But this momentary thought, was too fragile to stand firm and last longer.

Deb spent a lot on the eighth birthday of Alka. He brought a variety of garments, chocolates and an electronic car for her, and many things for Bindu as well. Very fondly, unwrapping, he showed the car running on a remote control and then, handed over to

Alka. Alka and her next door mate started playing with the car. Leaving them at play, Bindu and Deb had stepped inside.

While taking tea in the dinning room, they peeped out through patio door. Ruby, next door girl was playing with the car and Alka was standing indifferently. After sometime, leaving the car there, she proceeded inside. She stopped in front of the kitchen door.

“Look! What use of spending that much money? Just see, Ruby is playing and in no time, Alka lost interest.” Bindu had pointed outside with her right hand while addressing to Deb.

“You never know the mood of the children,” Deb replied looking outside.

One day, while returning from her school, Alka met her father Joginder. As soon as she saw him, she took him in a tight embrace. Then sitting inside his car, they both kept conversing for quite a while. Joginder picked up a bag from the back seat and advanced towards Alka containing a calculator and some sweets. After sometime, he dropped Alka near her house and drove away.

That day, she was overjoyed. At home very fondly, when she recounted the whole incident to her mother, she flared up in anger and spoke so much of nonsense. Alka felt as if she had committed a big mistake and quietly went to her room.

Finally, when Bindu’s temper cooled down, she knocked at the door of Alka’s room. Opening the door, she saw Alka holding the calculator in her hand and Bindu said to her, “Come downstairs please and I prepare a meal for you,” saying this she got occupied in the kitchen chores.

The next day, when Bindu went out of the kitchen to empty garbage bucket, she was surprised to see that the same car was lying in the dustbin outside, which Deb had given to Alka.

“This girl has lost her senses,” muttering this she took it out, cleaned and put it inside. Then she thought that perhaps, Ruby might have thrown it there.

It was Friday, a nice sunny day. Alka had just come out of the gate of her school when she caught the sight of Joginder’s car parked near by. She went running and he opened the door; she occupied the seat next to him. She felt like crying and then looked at her father’s face. She observed he also had just stopped crying. They talked for about half an hour.

“Just see I have bought a tele-tubby for you,” saying this he gave her a bag. Seeing the tele-tubby, she was beside herself with joy.

“How nice it’s papa! It’s lovely, I like it. Papa, you are so nice, so sweet. Thanks a lot,” she couldn’t control her tears.

Soon a young lady approached and took the back seat saying ‘Hi Alka ! How are you?’ Surprisingly she looked at Joginder and asked, ‘Papa, who is she?’

“My friend Susan, someday, may be your mum!”

These words hurt Alka’s mind but she kept mum.

Soon their car was stopped outside a café. Sitting at a table Alka was carefully observing the movements of Susan.

“She can’t be a mum. She will sell sex and the day will come when dad will not be able to afford.” she thought to herself. She wanted to realise her dad but could never dare. Before departing, she looked at Susan’s face and from some distance murmured, ‘fuck in bitch.’

Coming home, she thought not to tell anything to her mum and hence hid the tele-tubby. That night, closing the door of her bedroom, she kept playing with it for a long time.

That week end, it was about afternoon when Deb rang the bell.

“Have a look, who is it?” Bindu shouted from the kitchen.

“Same fuck in bastard comes to buy sex,” she uttered quietly before opening the door. On entering, he fondly approached and gave her a coloured box containing a remote control helicopter.

They flew the helicopter in the back garden and neighbours also joined them in fun. Neighbouring children were feeling pleased to see it and at the same time, in their heart of hearts they were also feeling envious of Alka.

Next morning, Bindu was beside herself, not only with amazement but also with anger, to find the helicopter lying in the dustbin.

“After all, how long shall I tolerate this girl’s foolishness?” Bindu said to herself, “What offence have I made? Why is she behaving like this? These questions outraged her.

“She will not behave unless she gets a thrashing,” infuriated she started climbing up stairs and pushed violently, the door of Alka’s room. Raising her arm ready to deal a blow, she shouted, “How long shall I tolerate these silly acts of yours?”

Holding the tele-tubby in her arms, Alka raised her head and looked into her mother’s eyes. Her innocent looks were asking the same question silently, “Mum, how long can I bear this injustice of yours. Do tell me, how long?” And without saying a word, Bindu stepped downstairs.

Chapter 7: Transformation

After about ten hours, I was in Vancouver. It was a long tiresome flight from London. Only a few years ago, my nephew had moved from UK to Canada for personal betterment. He was happy for earning a good salary but unhappy about social life. At times, he decided to come back to UK. I remember his dad felt the same when he had emigrated from India to England.

For my sake, he had taken a leave for a fortnight. I thought that since I happen to be in Canada, why I should not meet some acquaintances belonging to my rural background. I rang up to one and he responded, "This week, I am on night duty. To make a night off, you know.....?"

"That's enough my friend, I never asked you to make a night off, enough of meeting you. Anyway, thanks," saying this, I put the receiver down.

My nephew looked at me askance. I explained him that Bha ji had maintained this man's father for six months in England, without charging him a penny for his boarding and lodging. His wife had looked after him as her own father. And now this fellow tells me that it's difficult to make a night off. I simply don't like anyone to make a time off, but he could meet us tomorrow, after having a good sleep.

One day, my nephew, Shami took me to his in-law's relations. I realized that none of the eyes had the gleam of welcome. A sense of compulsion and anxiety to get free of us was writ large on their faces, formal conversation and suffocating environment seemed to be unbearable for me. That was beyond my experiences. Now it started to become clear to me why Shami was thinking to return to UK!

Next morning, Shami blurted out, "Uncle, today we shall go to the house of aunty Surinder."

"You are very naughty, you ruffian. You have sent your wife to work and now thinking to take me somewhere to fill my stomach. Are we beggars? Cooking is my hobby otherwise we can eat at any restaurant. For the sake of my health and in the interest of my lifestyle, I prefer to eat at home.

"But, don't you wish to meet anyone now?" he asked.

"We must meet uncle Ram Singh, however. It is long since I met him in India. Also uncle is a man of guts!" I told him admiringly.

At our native village, our houses are in the same street. My mother and aunty Channo had sisterly relations. Though Channo was not my real aunt, but our families had deeper mutual love and understanding than some blood relations.

All praise to uncle Ram Singh! He always put on fashionable clothes, had good food and drinks, indulged in luxury to his fill, and was fond of keeping company with important people. Social gatherings were either organised on the second floor of the house or sometimes, in the courtyard of the farm house.

Whenever it was held in the farm, Khushia had the responsibility of preparing meat. In preparing meat dishes, in the whole village, he was thought to be the greatest expert. While cooking outside, he would again and again go in to fill his peg and on pretext of

tasting, put a little on his plate after each peg. The chapattis would come prepared from home.

Uncle Ram Singh had no son, Meeto was his only daughter. He owned twenty five acres of fertile land and he made the best of every day he lived.

Sometimes, a couple of cars were also seen parked at the farm and party continued till late at night. On such a night, aunty Channo and her daughter Meeto could hardly sleep in peace. Many a time, worrying on account of Ram Singh, a thought of some call girl's presence also made them uneasy. Channo tried her best to make Ram Singh realize that their daughter had grown up, and what she would think if she ever knew of such revelry activities. But how could Ram Singh get rid of his inculcated habits?

In my imagination, I began to visualise clearer images of aunty and uncle's faces; Ram Singh's attire like that of the bigwigs, glowing face, tomato like red cheeks, intoxicated eyes, coiled moustaches, fun loving and humorous temperament, and a broad chest. But Channo was just the opposite, depressed face as if she were ever grieving, though every amenity was available to her at home. Ram Singh's purse was always bursting at seams but still sometimes, aunty was obliged to barter grains, jiggery or cotton for small things like soap or washing powder.

Right from the first day, Channo had been swayed by Ram Singh and this poor lady, had remained somewhat terrified. She had never been able to speak aloud to her husband's excesses. There was no lack of essential dairy products like milk and butter at home and the neighbouring women added cheer to their house on the pretext of getting buttermilk or yogurt. Curds, butter and fresh vegetables were never out of stock, but still, Channo had never looked buoyant. Whenever she cracked a joke with me, a spark was visible glowing in her despondent eyes. At such moments, it seemed as though some fire like that of live coal lay buried in the hot ashes of her longings; such a fire of life as could flare up into a flame, finding a vent.

Perhaps main cause of aunty's helplessness and despondency was that, God hadn't blessed her with a son. Secondly, up to the time of Meeto's marriage, Ram Singh had squandered away fifteen acres of their fertile land in his luxurious lifestyle. This anxiety was eating into vitals of Channo's life as to, what would become of the remaining ten acres!

Someone among the relations, passed on the information that Meeto was her parent's only daughter and inherits ten acres land. This way, Meeto was married to a boy settled in Canada. Having reached Canada, after few years, Meeto managed to fetch her parents also. Hence Ram Singh and Channo left Punjab and settled in Canada.

I told Shami to bring my contact-book out of my bag, so that I might try a tinkle to uncle Ram Singh. When I rang up, aunty Channo responded from the other end. After enquiring about our well being, she said, "You scoundrel, you have been here in

Vancouver for ten days, and calling up to us today. Listen, your uncle is about to return and let me note down your phone number. Sooner he arrives, before setting out we shall take your address and will shortly be coming to fetch you. Don't go away."

After giving the phone number I said to Shami, "Well boy, you also may resume your duty and I have found the people like myself. Just see, she hasn't said anything like that it was a busy season and they were short of leisure."

Exactly after an hour, Ram Singh called up and said, "Sukhbir, how are you man? Let me have your address and I send Meeto off in no time. She stays at a short distance from us. I haven't learnt how to drive; nor felt the need of it as my employer pick me up, and drop back home in the evening. Your aunty and Meeto work in the same factory and either has a car."

Ram Singh's tomato like red and glowing face was revived in my imagination. One, who loves to make the most of his life, has a distinct nature. He, who never enjoys his own meal at home, can't feed an outsider too? Strange questions start arising in my mind. In this speedy age, everyone is constantly yoked to his work and one day suddenly, he breathes his last, in the same fetters. Is man created to lead this type of life only? Is life not to be cherished or enjoyed? Is purposeless hoarding of money, the aim of life? It is to be lived and savoured along with the work. Is it our duty to amass money for our offspring, yet to be born? If life is a blessing, why does it taste bitter? Can't we help putting this yoke of labour, around the necks of our children too? Can this material abundance alone, afford real happiness? There must be some limit to avarice! Is love not the basic need of man? Only the sentiments of love and affection are the beauty of the world. Such several thoughts, one after the other, kept running through my mind.

I started thinking that after coming to Canada, the personality of uncle Ram Singh must have blossomed further. I began to visualize close cropped head and inflated ruddy face of uncle, and scoundrel glittering eyes!

As Gurmeeto (Meeto) rang the bell, I came out of the world of my fancy. While conversing, after about an hour's drive, we reached a building block. In this very block, uncle owned a flat on the second floor. Meeto rang the bell and a staggering, emaciated and feeble old fellow, opened the door from inside.

"Oh! You, really, what has happened to you uncle?" suddenly these words came to my lips.

I thought that, if uncle is in this miserable plight, then aunty must be in much more worn out condition, trudging up her way. But how could she be driving a car? I wondered in myself.

Formally, we engaged in enquiring about each other's well being. After a while, the bell rang and uncle got up to open the door, but in the meanwhile Meeto opened it. Handing over two plastic carrier bags to Meeto, a pretty woman took me in her embrace. I felt like asking the uncle about this young lady, but could say nothing.

I only kept looking towards aunty Channo. I could not believe, glittering eyes, the bunch of keys and a cell phone held in hand, white-ruddy complexion, sharp features and talking like an actress. It made me amazed.

“Let's sit over there,” uncle pointed towards the sitting room. After exchanging few words, we sat closely. “Shall we start? It is already late enough and Sukhbir must be tired as well,” staring at me and aunty, said uncle.

As he poured beer for me, aunty said, “Let me also have something, I am tired too.” Uncle looked behind sofa and then called out, “Meeto have a look in the kitchen if some wine saved on that day is there, to soak your mother's lips.”

Then looking at me, he addressed, “You might have experienced, Sukhbir, in these countries, it is the women who rules. I think for the last rung of life, India is better. But your aunty will be the last person to agree.”

“Enough of your India, I have seen. Don't be mistaken; you, too, will not now find India of yore. Forget your merriments of the past. What is missing here? Do the work and get wages week by week,” aunty told in a straight forward language.

Holding her wine glass, aunty moved towards kitchen where Meeto was already engaged in preparing dinner. After finishing his peg in one go, uncle asked, “What about your land at Jullundur?”

“Bha ji has sold that when last time he visited India.”

“How much have you sold for?”

“Nearly five millions.”

“Very good, very good,” he said pleasingly.

“I think your Bha ji had bought it for little less than a quarter of a million only, at that time.” He tried to remember.

“Has he sold his flat in Mumbai as well?” he asked again.

“I suggested him to sell it but he thinks to keep it, in case any children wish to go for a holiday.”

“Has he dropped the idea of making a film?”

“It's a team work and some members of that team, he finds not very honest and reliable. That's the reason, I suppose, he and his partner Subhash have changed their minds.” I tried to explain the whole situation.

“How big is that?”

“It has two bedrooms and a spacious lounge. It is a nice flat, newly built but bit far away, on the outskirts of the city. After spending two months in London, I hope to fly straight to Mumbai as one of my friend from Chandigarh, planning to make a tv serial. By that time, rainy season will also be over.”

Sooner aunty Channo returned, he again touched the subject of settling back in India. “What would we do there?” she asked angrily. “Look! Here I earn three hundred and sixty dollars a week and owns a car. Same amount of money he earns,” she addressed me.

Looking at me, she further added, “Would that be possible in India? Here I can buy, eat or drink whatever I like. What is lacking in this country? I am not going to India. Let him try if he wants to have a taste of his native land and I bet, he will be disillusioned in no time.

Looking at her face and intrepid coquetry, I was amazed to see the transformation in her thinking. I could clearly see the smouldering fire blaze into a full flame of life.

Chapter 8: **Right or Wrong!**

For about a fortnight, I have been sleeping in this bed.

I am about to get down from my bed on the right side, but my leg strikes against the wall. Perhaps, I am half asleep still or half awake as yet! I don't know whether I am in London or in Mumbai. In my London house, there is a wall to the left side of my bed while in Mumbai the wall is on the right side of the bed.

After brushing my teeth, I put water on the stove to boil for tea. Thereafter, with a cup of tea, I sit at the dining table. My mind is still haunted by the thought of that shoe polishing lady.

On the very first, I had got my shoes polished rather hesitatingly. While polishing, she had looked towards me three or four times, wearing a mysterious smile on her face. I wanted to escape the notice of the vendors, and others around. At a short distance, another elderly man was also engaged in cobbling and polishing. On the other side of the road, two boys also followed the same business. I didn't want that they should be obliged to think why I choose that particular shoe polisher.

After taking my tea, I put the empty cup in the sink. But still, my thoughts are occupied by that lady.

Initially, this area of Mumbai has seemed to be very strange to me. Now I realize, as if I had some old relationship with these labourers who had come from outside, their cottages and this shoe polishing woman. This strange relationship had obliged me to purchase two pairs of leather shoes and one of sandals.

While lying in a corner of this metropolitan city as an alien, I had started considering this city to be my own. Whether the city had owned me or not, I did not care much. Your own city is the one where your own people reside.

Similarly, your native land is the one which provides you with livelihood and habitation. For me, to be honest it is east London.

While having a shave, I am suddenly struck with the idea that today I should try a phone call to Anita. But soon after, I change my mind recalling an incident of four years old. At that time, I didn't have even such a friend as I could trust like a buddy or a brother. I don't know why my mind got prepared to repose confidence in her. I had no bank account and in spite of my faith in her, she refused to deposit my money in her personal account, I received from Bha ji. After all, how long had I known her? I had met her just twice or thrice; or we had sat together for about an hour before her show started.

On seeing her show, I had been greatly impressed. I had seen such a role being played by an actress, for the first time in my life. But on meeting her outside the theatre, I was very clear in my mind that this was not the same Anita, who had innocently and honestly, played the role of a depressed and oppressed woman, on the stage inside.

I am a very raw hand so far as the worldly matters are concerned. Sometimes, I become infinitely emotional. I do not know whether being so sentimental is a merit or a demerit of a person! I have always suffered a loss on this account. The acquaintances, friends and relatives have always tried to exploit me. This is what I feel now, but can't help change my nature. Emotionally overpowered, I had taken some people for Gods. Now, when I have learned to understand such Gods, I feel that ordinary manual workers, to some extent, are more honourable than these Gods.

Westerly wind is blowing. I feel like keeping the door of the hall open. If I close it, I feel somewhat lonely. I think that I should have a gauzy door outside which let me breeze in, and the neighbours, too, will have no objection.

I take yogurt out of the fridge, make thick buttermilk and start drinking. Without this, I am unlikely to be satisfied. To escape from some sort of inner loneliness, I sit outside in a plastic chair in the front garden. One of the neighbours comes and sits close to me, to be acquainted with. I ask him where I could get folding steel beds from. He tells me, "Brother, it is a custom of the villages. Why do you want these beds? What for? Here in Mumbai, there is the custom of spreading mattresses on the floor itself. You have a nice comfortable bed for yourself, for the visitors, you can spread mattresses in other rooms." "But if you spread the same mattress on the cot, it will become a sort of bed. When you don't want to use it, simply fold and store it," I expressed my idea, but he is obstinate about the custom in Mumbai.

And finally, he convinced me briefly, "Look brother, here weather is quite different from UK and Punjab. In Punjab, such beds can be comfortable in winter but not that much in summer. In countries like UK, it is entirely a different story. Here in Mumbai, everyone hasn't got air conditioning."

Thinking to go out, I am about to put on my sandals and then, I change my mind to go out with my boots on. After my children settled in London, I stayed with them for months but never felt the need to polish shoes. The same shoe polisher lady, again, occupies my mind. On my shoes, I put some soapy dirty water in order to put some stains and think of course, on the road they will gather some dust as well.

Before turning to the station road, I think of getting my shoes polished. Then I am reminded that the urgent job must be attended to first. While I am undecided, the face of the same woman makes me restless. My shoes are not in need of getting polished, then why do I direct my steps thither? What is the unusual thing about her? By now she too, must have realized this pretext of mine to see her. How a man can go out of the way for the sake of an ordinary woman, I wonder! Some men of daredevil type go straight away, but shy and sentimental like me, are in a greater need of appearances, good conduct and feints.

I deliberate in my mind as to which province she belongs to. She does not seem to be a Marathi. Does she belong to Rajistan? Her apparel seems to suggest so, but these days, you can't depend upon the apparel for certain.

The dress has been reduced to a matter of show and fashion. It is not necessary that a

person wearing saffron coloured clothes, may be a saint, he can be a robber as well. Life is very complicated and very diverse under this global roof.

Whatever, that lady appears to me like a goddess. Such a pretty girl! Oh no, she isn't a girl, she is a woman. She must be nearly thirty or so. That two-three years old child, playing near by, must be her own issue. But, in what profession should her husband be? Who knows she may be all alone perhaps, abandoned by her husband. But how can one leave such a beautiful and earning woman? No man can be so foolish! Perhaps, her husband may be a drunkard and a luxury loving fellow; she herself may have deserted him. I think that's why, she is earning her living respectfully. Otherwise, many young and beautiful women like her, are earning easy money, shamelessly.

I feel like taking a cup of tea, at the tea stall on the opposite side. Sipping my tea, my attention is again diverted towards her. What a figure she has been blessed with by God! In my imagination, I see her very gradually being divested of her clothes. How can one avoid getting intoxicated! But to be honest, the quality which has elevated her, in my estimation, is her attachment to her living. It is a blend of honour, honesty and industry. I am struck by the idea that nobody ever shows respect to anyone; person commands it through the mode of her or his livelihood and conduct.

I move ahead maintaining some distance from her and try to see whether she also takes interest in me or not. I cast an awry glance at her. Perhaps she too, has seen me I suppose. While crossing the road, again, I stare towards her and then, move towards a pine apple juice seller, and start shuffling my feet there.

There is another coaster near by who sells vegetables and salads. A woman comes there and behaves hesitatingly and then, stops near that barrow. While taking the juice, I attentively keep gazing at her. The coaster treats her as a regular customer and pays no heed; he seems indifferent to her presence. She keeps staring at the vegetables for a pretty long time and then, gathers courage in a way and advances her hand such a way, that she seems to be afraid of the accusation of defiling the vegetables. I observe everything surreptitiously. At length, she picks up a tomato and a small cauliflower, and hands over to the coaster. The cauliflower must be of the size of an onion, though its size was increased by the surrounding stalk arms. Without uttering a word, coaster accepts some change from her and puts in coffer, and then puts two or three green chillies on her palm.

Some big tears glided over my cheeks from my eyes. For fear of being noticed by someone, I wiped them. But perhaps, the coaster has observed all this. My sentimental nature again seems to make a laughing stock of me.

“Sahib, this woman has two children to bring up. Her husband wastes his full day's earnings on alcohol. What can this helpless woman do? Somehow, she has to run her house,” coaster tells me after observing my eyes following that woman, proceeding towards the parade of shops on the opposite side. Without saying a word, I proceed to cross the road.

Suddenly I was reminded that my toothpaste is likely to be exhausted. Turning back I approach a grocery shop. There, the same woman is standing and demanding ghee for one rupee. The grocer wipes a ghee smeared ladle on a small polythene sheet.

After putting toothpaste in my bag, I again move across the road and begin to think how this woman will manage with such a small quantity of ration! Will it be enough to satisfy the appetite of four persons? Her husband alone will devour all this after drinking. Then I think that such men are very mean. They return home after consuming fish or meat outside. They return home only to spend the night or to belabour the wife. Numberless questions cross my mind, pushing one another, just as the commuters run into one another while entering or coming out of the local trains at Mumbai.

Across the road, I direct my steps towards the park. My internal restlessness directs me towards that shoe polishing lady. I move ahead without paying any attention to others. Two kids seem to be laughing at me or this can be my own illusion, because a criminal is always conscious of his own acts. I gather courage and approach that lady. On seeing me, she smiles to say hello or welcome. She dusts a piece of old sack to put my foot on. Occasionally, she looks at me while polishing my shoe. I can see some questions wrapped in her faint smile. Her awry glance penetrates to the innermost depth of my being. I feel like asking her name and whereabouts but, noticing near by coaster, I keep mum. Possibly, she too, has similar questions to ask. Shamefacedly, again she throws a smile looking at my face.

I put on my shoes and as always, respectfully, put five rupees on her palm.

While returning home, I think why she does not talk much. After all, being a customer she should wax intimate and then I ask myself, why do I bother about her? Has her work produced devotion for her in my mind? Or perhaps, her simple beauty has captivated me! Sometimes, from someone's companionship, one wants to satisfy his emotional or mental desire. And many a time, it is only a physical. But this sort of relationship, only confined to physical gratification, cannot last longer.

For the sake of my emotional and mental satisfaction, I like people of artistic interests, creative. That's the only reason, I long for the company of Anita. Same is the reason for my liking of Azeem Deol. His sincere nature makes one yearn for his hand of friendship. He is a very candid person with rural simplicity, a good poet, and moreover a nice human being.

All the people of similar interests and qualities are not sincere or great. It is also neither possible. Some of them turn out to be incorrigible. For such professionals, art is an article of the market only. Their ego of being extraordinary, break them away from the common people, even from their own fans! Their mentality, then, prevent them moving about among the ordinary people. But, this polishing girl has been born and brought up amongst common people, possibly educated up to middle school or so, and to me, seems very fascinating. Don't know why?

Now, I have started feeling peeved at myself. Why am I focussed by her thoughts? How am I related to her? This idea makes me start on a search, for the meaning of

relationship. Now, in this cosmopolitan city, I have made some acquaintances. In many cases, the relationship of acquaintance has given way to friendship. Many of them are big people, great personages in themselves, who can't have any genuine compassion for me. Where do they me? Nothing, Simple is that.

Whenever, I feel lonesome and depressed, I long for the company of such a person for their shoulder to cry on.

The alarm rings. It is going to be seven o' clock and I feel like sleeping for about another hour or so. But, I will have to get up because last night, I promised to meet Mr Behal at nine.

The whole day is spent in loafing about, in the company of Behal Sahib. He is after getting his serial approved. Sometimes, I get bored while roaming about with purely business minded people, like Behal ji. They are devoid of any sense of humour or tit bits. That's why I love to be with jokers, people with a sense of humour. Laughing and joking is my hobby. I can do that all day. I hate to drink during the day, yes regularly at night time before dinner, to have a sound sleep. I can't understand why these people don't consider merry, making a part of life. Money is end, all and be, all for such people. It is essential for the basic needs of life. Has anyone ever been able to purchase happiness with money alone? Those people who claim to have purchased, are confined to eating and drinking or material possessions. They are far away from the real and natural happiness of everyday social life, and peace of mind.

It is about to be twilight and I feel curious to see that lady, I mean that polishing woman. She usually departs back before this time. What is she doing here today? I am surprised. To be speaking honestly, the cause of my increasing interest in her can be nothing than physical. I feel like daring to invite her, on some pretext to exchange emotions. My interest created on account of her honest earnings, now, seems to be confined only to her physique. If there had been some old, ugly or dirty woman in her place, she would never ever have become the focus of my thoughts.

A man is vending mangoes near the barrow of the hawker, selling general merchandise. I go towards him thinking of buying some mangoes. A sophisticated man is standing near and talking to the hawker. I have focussed my ears on their whispers, on the pretext of buying mangoes. Surprisingly, I was shaken by their conversation, even carried on at a low pitch. The ground seemed to be sinking underneath my feet.

.....I do not know why today, the day is passing so slowly! I had been upset throughout the previous night, on account of the last evening's incident. More than a half bottle of rum couldn't help me sleeping and it is disturbing me even now. I wish, sooner that lady leaves and I ask everything by probing the mind of that hawker.

".....Sir, this much I know that you come here for the sake of Parvina. One has to come to terms with circumstances to fill one's stomach. You know these days nobody can be trusted. That's why no longer she is prepared to go with any stranger. There is a hotel on the opposite side, if you want....," hearing these words, I felt as if I had been betrayed by and felt I had again become an alien, in this area of cosmopolitan city.

After several weeks, today again, I put on my trainers. Compared to leather shoes, they seem to be very light, comfortable and smart.

Seeing me approaching, the hawker starts talking to Parvina. Unlike before, today, I don't feel diffidence. I buy a comb from that vender. Then saying, "Hello Parvina," I put my foot before her. She looks towards me, in a serious posture. Looking at her, then I withdraw my foot a little and say, "I am sorry, I am wearing wrong shoes today, hence can't be polished."

"Possibly, today only, you have put on the right shoes," saying this, she lifts her head up staring at me. Her eyes are filled with tears. Her previous smile seems to have dissolved in the water of her eyes.

I take out an envelope from my pocket and places in her hands.

"What's that?" she asks askance!

"Please don't open until I disappear." And I walk off.

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Chapter 9: **Defeat**

Last time, when my brother and his family visited India, a family belongs to Ludhiana, had also come with them and stayed at our joint house for overnight. Their daughter from London and my son mutually shared so much in common that they made a good equation. That's where the matter had lead to their matrimony. As the wedding was supposed to take place in London, Bha ji had taken every responsibility. My brother-in-laws and uncles, Jawala Singh and Banta Singh insisted over the phone, to fetch along my wife with me as well. The day she got a visa, she was over the moon to participate in her son's wedding ceremony.

My daughter-in-law is an optician and my son is a dentist. I was at my son's dentistry when I had met Jeeta, whom I knew from India. A lot of Asians live in this area of East London. He had come here in late seventies, illegally and after acquiring legal status, he has fetched his family.

When he used to do farming back home, in India, he would work really hard as his bullocks. He flew his sweat day and night in order to make some savings. He was a likable fellow but, when he used to distil white rum from his fermented sugarcane juice, he would drink senselessly, sometimes.

Now, he has bought his own house. His job in a foundry is very dirty, heavy and hot. Not many people like it, yet, he think himself fortunate enough to have such a well paid job. For him, it may be many times easier than that, he would do in his fields back home. For a manager or supervisor, skin colour makes no difference. All they are concerned in production and are happy enough to have such a worker. No doubt, his wife is equally a hard working lady and responsible too.

About the domestic life of the Asian families, in the privacy of their own respective homes, initially, there had been many misconceptions in the minds of some white people. That's why perhaps, when Richard rented a room in the house of Jeeta, he had felt that it were only the homes of these Asians that were inhabited in real terms. He thought that people like him were the residents of houses only. And at that time, he felt as if he had rented a room in a heaven like place. What an illusion! That was merely a false perception about an unknown culture.

By profession, Richard was a carpenter. Though his company paid him good wages, but still being a laborious, many a time, he did private work over the week ends to earn extra. He had two children, a son and a daughter. As long as both children were at school, his wife Sam kept strolling about in shops, parks or cafes. She never felt the need to take any job neither she had any particular hobby.

Steve, who was their milkman, a handsome young man in early thirties, had been ditched by his wife. A smile was always dancing on his lips. He was very hardworking and a humours fellow. Then only God knows why his wife had started living with another person, abandoning such a young man!

Since the day his wife had ditched him, he had been feeling out of place at his home.

But towards his work, as before, he showed the same sense of responsibility. He would get up three in the morning, collect and deliver milk and in this way worked up to seven or eight. He would have a brief siesta during the day and would have to go to bed round about ten at night.

The day his wife had separated, Sam had been getting more and more sympathetic towards Steve. Gradually, this compassion took a form of friendship and they started moving about together. As their mental camaraderie reached the extent of physical companionship, they were unable to know, whether they had adopted a wrong path or a right one.

Trouble started brewing between Sam and Richard. Their children started despising their mother and Steve. Initially, Sam used to call Steve at her house when the children were at school. But in no time, they would meet each other intimately and went wherever they liked, even in the presence of Richard and the children.

At last, the matter reached the court and Sam, who had been living with her husband affectionately, happily and faithfully, now was separating from him. The law declared Sam to be the owner of the house and gave her custody of the children. But, what happened to poor Richard? He was punished for being a good husband and a responsible father, in addition to being a noble and a hardworking man. The law of the land while it sympathises with the woman and pleads for their equal rights, sometimes, seems to exhort some women to get spoiled and break away, and innocent kids are left to suffer. It is possible that majority of criminals, may come from such backgrounds. Perhaps, that's why street crime and knife culture is beyond control.

Sometimes, such inconceivable incidents take place in life. Sitting in his rented room, alone in amazement, Richard kept thinking about his past. He thought of his house purchased and decorated with hard work that accommodated his happy family. An idle brain is a devil's workshop. The whole family is ruined when a woman goes astray.

Yet, in this world, many women must be prey to men's tyranny and for them a husband is the only security in life and family. But in the countries where woman is not economically dependent upon her husband and is incapable of digesting the right of equality, there breaking up of the homes is not something unnatural. These days, this story is equally applicable to the Indians residing in Europe or North America. Moreover, the children in these broken families have to undergo such a suffering that no other tragedy is comparable to it, even the death of a father or mother.

Jeeta, by renting a room to Richard was happy for two reasons. Firstly, he has increased his income. Secondly, renting to a white tenant rather than an Indian, privacy of his domestic life could be more secure.

"He may be able to neither understand our language and not to know anything about us," that was his thinking. But poor fellow didn't know that there is a script less language, through which one can communicate to the other.

Richard was so industrious that over the week ends, one by one, he replaced all the old doors of Jeeta's house. Perhaps, he might be repaying the salt that he was consuming in this house. He would eat freshly cooked chapattis with chicken or lamb curry. He would shower praises on Meeto for cooking onion bhaji and other delicious meals.

Richard liked very much a woman like Meeto, who earns equal to a man and coming home in the evening, attended to the household duties. Her weekend was spent in cleaning and washing. On the contrary, what their men do? Drink, eat, laugh, joke and sleep, that's all the story of foundry or factory workers.

Many a time, Jeeta, along with his friends, returned late from the pub, and Meeto and children would keep waiting for him. Whenever, any of his friends would accompany, they would sit with opening a bottle of whiskey. None would realise when it was midnight. To start with, Meeto took this discomfort and the services to her husband and guests for a good fortune but, with the time, her mode of thinking started changing.

One day, Jeeta came across a single man at the pub. "Why should you singe your hands cooking food all alone, at this time? Come along and go after eating," saying this, he lead that man to his own house. After reaching home, they emptied a full bottle and then, gnawed the legs of roasted chicken.

Now Meeto would, many a time, for the sake of her husband's health and wastage of money, criticise the way of eating and drinking inviting friends at home. Jeeta would flare up over such a criticism. Seeing him in temper, Meeto and children would be scared to silence.

Jeeta would spend liberally on whiskey and beer but now, sometimes, grudged even small expenses of the family. After returning from work, he often went straight to a near by pub and after having three four pints of bitter, returned home. That was his weekday's routine.

One day, as he reached home, Meeto showed him the letter from India that her mother was seriously ill and were short of ten thousand rupees, to get her operated. Meeto had expected sympathy from him, but he hurled the letter away and pouring whiskey in his glass said, "You tell me for how many devils shall I spend? Brother needed for a tractor and his son, for a scooter! From what tree can I pluck the money from?" hearing these harsh words from Jeeta, she thought it advisable to keep quite.

On the advice of one of her colleague friends, she started saving few pounds weekly to help her mother. After a while, combining her savings and borrowing some from a friend, she sent this without the knowledge of Jeeta. Though, hiding something like this always seemed to her a sin, yet, she could not help joining her mother in adversity.

How can a one's lie and a theft remain hidden? At last, the cat was out of bag. When Jeeta got a clue to it, not only he used abusive language but, angrily, also slapped her twice on the face.

This trouble took such a contemptible form that Meeto started feeling, as if she were

living with some unknown person, not her own husband. In a situation like this, whenever she felt depressed beyond measure, she would press her both sons to her bosom as though she herself, wanted to be embraced by them.

As Richard noticed, the gradual unravelling of the layers of the 'heaven', he started feeling deeply concerned about Meeto, feeling a pure and sacred compassion. He thought, "How very strange these people are! Why their mode of behaving indoors is different from the one for the society outside? After being thrashed at home, why don't these women complain to the police or a social worker? May be they believe in forgetting and forgiving! It is a sort of sacrifice for the sake of children."

Richard thought that Indian men were very industrious and as far as possible, they didn't let their ladies work outside, so that the children are looked after properly. But here the condition of such women is quite different and very pitiable.

"How long will this carry on!" he questioned himself. "Sooner their next generation grew up and adopted this environment and lifestyle, many of them, may turn out to be the ones like Sam," he wondered lost in his own observation.

God knows the root cause of that dispute. On that day, Jeeta had crossed all limits of restraint and anger. Children were scared too and at length, they requested him to stop, still Meeto had been severely thrashed that night.

Poor lady had been sitting in the front room, waiting for her husband's temper to cool down. She thought, he would come downstairs to take her up and in the bedroom, he would apologise, taking her in his embrace and then, she would forget everything. So what? How does it matter if he has beaten her! Surely, he will be repenting now. But that was merely her imagination. He never came down and had been sleeping and snoring all night, lost in his sound sleep. The children had gone to sleep in their own room.

The next day, she did not feel like going to work, considering what she would say if somebody asked about the finger marks on her face. She remained thinking, "For the sake of this man, I had quit my parental sibling, leaving behind compassionate environment, friends and neighbours. Now if I can't get love and compassion from this house, then what is there to sustain?" Her despondency flowed from her eyes in the form of tears.

She felt like no more than a slave, to look after him and bring up his children. But for the future of her children, she was prepared to bear all this and still, gladly! She started thinking again, "In India, this man wasn't so bad. Here in this country, instead of improving, what made him so unkind?"

As the children before going to school, expressed their consolation, she thought, "she should wait for them to start earning and then, they make him straight."

Meanwhile, she heard the creaking sound of the main door. That was Richard who had come from work and went straight up to his room. Lost in the world of disappointment, she didn't realise when it was four o' clock. Both of her sons had returned from school and she started preparing tea and snacks for them.

At night, when Jeeta learnt that Meeto had not gone to work, he roared to ask the reason.

“I wasn’t well,” Meeto said at a low pitch.

“Has a snake bitten you? People beat their wives black and blue and they utter not a word. Have the heavens fallen if I have lost a temper in drink?”

Upon receiving bitter words, instead of sympathy, Meeto couldn’t help control herself and said, “The day your sister was abused by her husband with reference to her mother, why did you feel infuriated? Why didn’t you think that husbands beat their wives black and blue...?”

Before she could complete her say, she received a forceful slap that rendered her face.

Upon receiving information by their elder son, Richard came downstairs and violently, shook Jeeta’s arm and said, “Stop it, If you touch her again...!” he looked angrily at him.

“What ju do?” Jeeta roared in response.

“I will call the police and get her away from you wherever she can remain safe and sound, understand?” Richard retorted with equal force.

Meeto failed to understand what Richard had said. She could only understand one word ‘police’. And Jeeta’s hand, raised in the air slackened at once. He felt that he had been vanquished, not only by Richard and the law of the land, but by his own self, too!

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Chapter 10: **I Know**

Once a week, sometime twice, my son and daughter never forget to ring us up. For the last two weeks, my son is insisting, "Dad your wheat harvesting is over. What are you waiting for now? Shall we send the tickets for both of you? Forget about the rice crop, let uncle Sohan worry about it. We are longing to see both of you."

Yesterday, he has asked Bha ji to ring me. He knows I can't dare to refuse whatever Bha ji, Malkiat says.

"Here in London, weather is getting very pleasant and in India, must be getting hotter. Come over here and return at the end of September. Don't be greedy and forget about farming responsibilities. No one is going to rob your crop in your absence. Secondly, Balwinder, whom they call Bindu, is desirable to work in films and hence, let her have the keys of the flat in Mumbai," again this morning, Bha ji instructed me. How could I dare to refuse?

I already knew that Bindu's mother was not in favour of her working in films. Actually, she had never wanted her to go away from Punjab. But Bindu, being a sentimental person as well as talented, had determined to make her career in acting. No doubt, she was a born actress! That's why her cousin, eldest in the family, after her dad's death, offered her his full support and encouragement.

At Chandigarh, she had just started her student life when seeing Satish, she lost her balance at the first sight and fell prey to this weakness of the sort of emotional people, who at times, usually think with their heart rather than brain. It was a spring season of her life. Offshoots had started sprouting on the boughs of her emotions. As their urges matured, bells started ringing mutually in their hearts, and their souls began intoxicated in this beautiful environment.

They acted together in plays, lived like good friends and kept company in eating out and roaming about. In the company of Satish, Bindu began soaring high in the sky. While flying high, an unexpected incident happened and she fell to the ground, so suddenly that not to speak of flying, she forgot even to walk on the ground.

A girl from New York came to Chandigarh to spend her holidays with her parents, and as soon as Satish had passed his Master's degree, he was married to her. Though, it was more likely a relationship between two families rather than between two individuals, yet, it all happened with the choice and approval of Satish. It was the biggest tragedy of Bindu's life and on the other hand, it may be a sort of excitement for Satish dreaming to fly to America; a land of opportunities people used to talk about in India.

Now, to Bindu, almost every man had started appearing a cheat and a hypocrite. Since then, she had started to denigrate the males through unusual actions and occasionally, humiliated them with a hidden desire to live with them equally, in every aspect. It may

be a reflection of revenge against Satish or male dominated society! It was bizarrely noticeable from her changed attitude.

The preparations for the national dramatic competition had completely preoccupied Bindu. Gradually, she started feeling released from tension and emotional stress and as earlier, she was absorbed in her education and the world of theatre. She identified herself with her roles in such a way that sometimes, she ceased to notice even the audience.

Just like her childhood, her college life had also gone far away and left behind but still, memories of the past kept knocking at the door of her heart, occasionally, here at Mumbai as well.

The sky was half hidden in clouds. Gentle gusts of breeze seemed very pleasant. She felt her lips getting dried and filled a glass of cold water from the fridge, and finished it at a draught. Feeling very depressed, she felt like crying to her fill in someone's arms or with her head on someone's shoulders! But at this time, none was with her. Her maid servant had also gone on a short leave on account of her mother's death and within the walls of her flat, she felt deserted even by her own shadow. Perhaps for the first time, she had been faced with a feeling of remorse over her being uprooted and a sense of alienation in this cosmopolitan city, far away from her homeland. She was confronted with a question, whether she was crying over her failure or success?

At the time of signing a contract, she thought a lot. Many a time, the attachment of the home back in Punjab, pulled her to give up films but at times, her dream had an upper hand over all this. She would think that life is nothing, after all, except the realisation of one's dreams! She was prepared to confront every danger and obstacle in her way to achieve her goal.

Bindu had found working in the films a lot easier than the theatre. One of her two films had failed at the box office, while the other one had turned out a mediocre one. In this film, Bindu had continued to dominate the heroine throughout the whole film.

For quite a while, she got no other offer. This disheartened her a little and she went through gloomy days, but her zeal was warmed up to struggle and survive. 'Never ever give up.' she kept this idea in her mind, day and night.

Suddenly, the rays of light flashed in the dark pathway of her life. Mukherji signed her for the main role in his film. Such engagements of films added colour to her aspirations and made her economic hardships overcome, in almost a year's time. When this film received an award, she got contracts for five more. Her secretary Vinod, found her a good elderly driver, Kareem Bakhsh who started looking upon Bindu like his own daughter. Having driven a taxi, he was familiar with every nook and corner of the city.

Time and again, she had thought of calling her mother to stay with her. Balbir and some other members of her family and relations had already paid visits to Mumbai. Last time,

she heard the wailing voice of her mother and could not help crying like a child. Then, she had assured her again and again, that she would come to fetch her to Mumbai.

Whenever on the set, she was lost in such thoughts, her colleagues would ask, "What's the matter, Bindu? We hope there is nothing untoward!"

"Yes, there is!" she would retort laughing. "These days, actually, I am having an affair with my mother."

She got two more films which made her sufficiently busy. She would think, "The rains are about to set in and some outdoor shooting will likely to stop for sometime and then, she can spare time to visit Punjab.

One day, she returned from shooting in a zealous and happy mood. Having been tired, she took a shower and Manjula being on leave, she prepared tea and began to read her mail. Suddenly, her telephone bell rang. The news that she received from the other end, made the earth sink underneath her feet. It was Balbir speaking, "The temperature is very high and earth is baking here in Punjab. Whatever was destined has happened. You have to show courage. Now you....." Her mother was no more and being all alone in the flat, she cried to herself. She thought to call Poonam and soon remembered that she had gone to Pune. Wanting to share her grief and give vent to her emotions, she thought of making a couple of calls to friend like persons, but soon changed her mind.

By chance shooting was off for a few days and she got an opportunity to come to herself. Otherwise, she could not help it. Suffering all alone in her agony and mournfulness, she would be required to play her role, according to the nature of the character before the camera.

The mother had to die, one day or the other. Within herself, a sort of regret was creeping. Alas! The mother could see her daughter's house and enjoy the amenities and comforts earned by her daughter, she once declared useless. In that case she could have returned to Punjab and at least, talked about her daughter proudly whom she had been condemning.

"How can she fill up these empty moments?" she was questioned by a sort of wistfulness inside her. She felt like ringing up Amarjit, but the next moment, she changed her mind thinking that it was no use looking towards a man again, had been rusticated out of life, after due trials and considerations.

"These bastard men never care to understand women mentally and emotionally, all they are interested in physical relationship! All men, not the same; still, hypocritically, they are more condemnable than women" she murmured hatefully.

When her maid servant, Manjula, returned from leave, the house was again seemed cheerful. Expressions of Manjula's love and compassion consoled her a good deal. While talking about the death of Manjula's mother, Bindu, in fact, reminded time and

again of her own mother. She felt like taking Manjula in tight embrace and crying her fill. But, the distance between the maid and a mistress, rendered it impossible.

After the dinner, both of them retired to their respective bedrooms. For a long time, Bindu kept rolling in her bed, then got up and went to the kitchen. Switching on the light, she opened the fridge and filled a glass of wine. For a while, first she kept standing in the balcony and after a while, sat in the dinning room sipping her wine. Hearing the sound Manjula approached and asked, "Are you ok madam?"

"Yes, I am fine. Don't worry about me. Go back to sleep. Today, you too, are tired." God knows how badly she was yearning for a sympathetic lap to lie on! Continuing drinking wine, she muttered, "I shall again soar, higher still...."

After switching of the light in the dinning room, she directed her steps towards her bedroom. Sooner she arrived in front of the door of Manjula's room, she felt as if somebody had tied a heavy weight to her feet. Hesitatingly, she entered her maid's room. Manjula thought that being intoxicated she might have mistaken the door.

As soon as Bindu had just seated herself in Manjula's bed, she tried to make her conscious, "Madam, your room is on the other side."
"I know," saying that much, she lay down beside her.

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Chapter 11: **Outdated Values**

Whenever Gurbachan came across, he had the same complaint against his wife, Harpreet.

"Everyone else can change but, not my wife. She is living in the past, that's why she is scared to face the present," he always grumbled.

Time kept elapsing along with changing circumstances and environment.

For some, it's very hard to change with the time. If they do try, they become too late to be able to walk along with contemporary values. Time leave them far behind.

Gurbachan's wife seemed to be one of such sort of people.

Obviously, any other person may be the same, brought up in the similar situation and environment as Harpreet. That day, over a trivial matter, she became furious.

"I have told you this much that I am not going to allow you to roam about with those girls at number fifty three. Their bearing and movements are not acceptable to the decent society. I have seen them with ruffian like boys," Harpreet, beside herself with anger, was telling to her daughter, Simmi.

Seeing her slightly cooled down, Simmi said, "Mummy, you are repeating what you said that day, for nothing. That boy is our college mate too. If he has given them a lift, how does it matter?"

"You tell me, what has happened? Has nothing happened as yet? If a young girl roams about in the car of any boy, don't you know what happens? What will other people of the fraternity, who notice it like me, say? A matter like this spreads through the whole town overnight, like a wild fire. You are nobody to say, how does it matter?"

"Don't make a mountain of a mole hill, roared Gurbachan, intervening. Then at a low pitch, he said, Simmi, my daughter, don't take ill of what your mother says. In fact, she is over worried about you. When she was of your age, time was quite a different. Now, in co-educational schools and colleges, how can we forbid you to speak to any boy! Go and prepare tea, perhaps after having a cup of hot tea, the temper of your mother may cool down,"

"It is not a matter of mere temper, the elder one also, had studied here. She had neither ever got her hair cut nor had she ever wear makeup. Everyone showered praises on her."

Observing Harpreet's temper cooling down, Gurbachan said in a lighter mood, "I tell you this, that the elder one was made in India and this one is made in England, so the difference between them two, is natural. Secondly, there wasn't any material of makeup available in villages, as it is today. Now, if you can use it, are the heavens going to fall if this poor girl has ever used a little?"

Meanwhile, Simmi arrived with tea and they took together. Bitterness produced in the

homely atmosphere, disappeared in no time. Perhaps a hot cup of tea, might have worked like a homeopathic medicine!

As the sun rose, the whole of the dining room was enveloped in the warm sunshine. Gurbachan left for work and Harpreet engaged in preparing breakfast for Simmi. Waiting for Simmi, she called in a loud voice, "Girl, come downstairs otherwise your breakfast will be cold."

"Just coming in a minute," Simmi answered from upstairs.

When she came down, sitting in front of the industrial sewing machine, she heard her mother abusing somebody

"Whom are you abusing, Mummy?" asked Simmi in amazement.

"Well, whom can I abuse and who gets abused by me? That damned clothing manufacturer has heaped all these garments beside me, saying that the belts are not properly stitched! Now I have to detach them all and stitch them again. He may be asked why he grudges for paying reasonable money for our labour, and now has imposed double labour on me. Look at this payslip envelope! He has taken away five pounds out of twenty seven as a tax. God knows! Whether he shows me as his employ or not! My previous employer has been deducting tax and national insurance, and when I found out, national insurance records showed nothing."

"Mum, still there is plenty of tea left in teapot if you want some," saying this, she again jumped upstairs.

For some time when Simmi didn't come down, Harpreet warned, "Girl, it is time to leave, don't get late again."

Upon receiving no response, she went upstairs and found Simmi applying eye shade before the dressing table.

"Can't you answer? I am shrieking that you shouldn't get late and here, you are after the makeup. Do you go there to study or to display fashion?" she asked angrily.

"Well mum, you cause a quarrel for nothing,"

"Do you tell me that I am causing a quarrel? What is the purpose of makeup in class rooms? The same time can be utilised for study! Your teachers also seem to be the chips of the same block."

"Oh mum! One looks smart, pretty and likeable. When you were young, were you not fond of...?"

Before she could complete the sentence, Harpreet was beside herself with rage. Uttering unpalatable words, she started descending downstairs. Simmi was very surprised too, but thought it advisable to keep quiet.

"The rascally girl wants to probe my youth. So far as we are concerned, feeling shy and ashamed was our second nature. We would never let our shawls slip from our heads. If she had been brought up there, she would have known such social norms," she remained muttering wrathfully.

Many a time, it wasn't so serious matter as Harpreet seemed to feel. When Simmi returned home, Harpreet still was in temper and didn't talk to her in a normal way. On

the contrary, Simmi was completely unaware that her mum was still angry on this account. A trifle of the morning took the form of a big domestic conflict, like a smouldering fire, within Harpreet.

When Gurbachan returned from work, expressing her unhappiness and anxiety, Harpreet cautioned, "Look! Don't repent of it tomorrow. Actions and movements of your beloved daughter are not desirable. After the day we married her off, she has to do makeup for the rest of her life. Now this time for her is to study, and rest you can consider yourself."

Interrupting her, he said, "You have not seen much of the outer world. You are mainly concerned with your industrial sewing machine and your own domestic life. The children of others are doing much more, you are fortunate enough to have such a nice daughter. Please do not upbraid the poor girl over very trivial matters. Believe me, this way she will go farther away from you and then, you have to repent. If she wears a slight makeup or wear a skirt instead of salwar, what harm will it do? Think like other people living in the twentieth century. After about one and a half decade, this century will be over too!"

"Ok, let it be like that. But one day you will have to feel penitent. Earlier, she had never retorted to me and now, she has a six inch long tongue," revealing her anxiety, she wanted that if Gurbachan keeps pulling up Simmi, she can become more obedient, perhaps this was her own belief.

Seeing a mood of calmness and seriousness, and sentiments of sympathy for her on Gurbachan's face, she further added, "If some guest happens to visit us, she has never behaved as the children of the respectable families do. Rather I feel ashamed. Instead of sharing my work in the kitchen or to serve them, she leaps up to her room and moreover today, she was reminding me of my youth days. The wanton girl may be asked as to what she knows about my youth."

In the silence of the night, the clock on the table seemed to tick louder. Harpreet felt that she was having a sort of conflict inside her. As she was caught in the vortex of her thoughts, her mind started reflecting on her childhood and youth, left far behind across many lands and seas. Her paternal village was a small one, like so many other villages in Punjab state. But it was in the neighbourhood of two town-like villages. Each day passed from dawn to dusk, in doing small chores and night under the star lit sky. She had a friend named Palo. They two, enjoyed mutual sisterly affection and often stayed at each other's house. Many a time, they would sleep on the same bed and spent whole night in conversation. God knows! What those matters were which could not be exhausted even in long daily discussions.

Palo was married earlier. Her younger brother-in-law was an engineer at Nangal dam. During holidays, he would come to visit Palo's village. God knows! What charm that young man possessed, that Harpreet was drowned over head and ears in love for him, in her thoughts. Time kept marching, parallel to her dreams. They kept intoxicated seeing each other. Within their minds, a desire to get closer began to take roots and one day, Harpreet's mother had noticed their mutual intentions. That day, she had been dealt severely. Thereafter, her mother followed her like a shadow.

Harpreet had pleaded hard with her friend, Palo, that she should persuade her mother for marriage to her brother-in-law. On the other side, Palo's brother-in-law also, made several solicitations. But, Harpreet's father had promised to some other party. That was Gurbachan, who was about to leave for UK. Hence, the dreams of Harpreet had been remained unrealised.

For full eight years, she remained in her village as a devotee of a foreigner, Gurbachan. At the spring time of her life, she was married and yet, remained separated for eight long years. Counting the days, she had passed these years and only she knew, how she had covered this gigantic journey of time, sobbing, sulking and lamenting! Only that person can have the experience of this sweet and light pain who has ever been confronted with it.

At last, she, along with her seven year old daughter, came to the glittering world of their dreams.

After joining her husband, she had forgotten the misery of her long separation. She was very happy to be in present leaving the past behind.

"How can these girls imitate our youth," she murmured to herself. Then, she started thinking how different these two worlds were? It is wrong, even to strike a comparison between them. It doesn't make sense. We had a veiled face and these girls have bare faces! Now even back home, no one has a veil.

The chain of her thoughts got linked again to the memories of her village life. She had a remembrance, besmeared with the feeling of fear and guilt. At their home, there was a fond and handsome brother-in-law, younger brother of her husband. The day speedily used to pass while she had fun with him. But every corner of their house, used to be watchful. If not, she could have committed some mistake too. At times, she had seen such a glimpse in the smile of the glowing eyes of her brother-in-law. She had noticed similar smiles in some young men's eyes when she was at her paternal village. She was well aware of this physical invitation. Perhaps, it was because of the circumstances, situations and restraints of that time of united family system, that his father's honour remained unstigmatised; otherwise, nothing could be said of Harpreet. Then suddenly, she felt irritated with such memories of the past and started trying to get rid of them to sleep. She didn't want to disturb her husband by rolling in the bed as he was in deep slumber.

It was after mid night. She just had a wink of sleep and was reawakened. She remained occupied in scrutinising these matters. After honest consideration, she felt that she was really pursuing meaningless and outdated things. She started feeling a sort of pity for Simmi. Then, she got up and switched on the light of her bedroom. Simmi was enjoying a sound sleep. Harpreet felt like awakening her and begging pardon of her. She wore a mysterious smile on her face and quietly putting off the light, she returned to her own room, tiptoe.

Chapter 12: **Good Old days**

Perhaps, everybody is reminded of his or her good old days, carefree time, spent happily in a friendly environment. After retirement, Banta, on account of rheumatic pains and Kartari, due to asthmatic trouble; both decided to go to and live in India, during the years of the fag end of their lives.

He had sufficiently exploited his body in the factories and foundries of England. Now, he must live in slight rest and respite. He had duly fulfilled all the duties of family life and this fulfilment, gave him a feeling of great pride and satisfaction. And why should he not feel proud? He used to work on night shifts and many a time in winter, weeks used to elapse without seeing the sun. Certainly, they can't be his good old days. May be, may not be. Who knows!

After reaching England, he had felt very depressed at this industrial life, but he was also unable to return. He had compromised with his mind and circumstances. There was no other alternative more or less like the other contemporary Indian immigrants. He had been burdened with the domestic responsibilities of their united family back home. But sometimes, he got so fed up with this sort of life that he wanted to become an ascetic and take refuge somewhere in the Himalayas. But no such thing either was possible or happened. He was obliged to live in a limited and specific circle, night time in factory and day time in bed. That is why, he was very happy even living away from his children.

They happily got rid of the custom officials at Delhi airport and sooner they came out, their nephew, Harpal, had arrived already there to receive them and by evening, they were at their home. They found the village very much changed, observing the surroundings.

Next morning, Kartari (Kartar Kaur) got occupied in conversing with the neighbouring women and Banta Singh set out to have a round of his farm. On the way, meeting and talking to the people of his village, he arrived at his farm house. He was very amazed and raged to see a bricked parlour in the corner of the field with guava trees. It was quite appropriate to feel angry. It was the duty of his nephew to ask him, at least for his permission. Secondly, he had not expired, nor was he issueless.

He felt that Harpal's wife washing utensils near the clay oven, had noticed his discomfort. Her children, leaping and bounding in the parlour, also seemed to ridicule him.

"It is ok, what is the importance of this wretched one canal of land," he tried to console himself. "Secondly, it hasn't gone to any stranger; after all, there isn't much difference between mine and my brother's children. It is one and the same thing. None of my children would come here to do farming!"

This way, facing such incidents, almost a week or so passed and every day, a feeling of being superfluous and unwanted, began to depress them. The keener this feeling was, the more anxiously they remembered their children, left behind in UK.

One day, by chance, all the members of their family had gathered at home. At night, after dinner, Kartari introduced the matter getting a cue from her husband Banta Singh. "Harpal, how long shall we stay here as guests? Secondly, it is not that we have never done manual labour before. If you vacate one portion of our house for us, presently this is sufficient for us and we can have the room upstairs for guests. Other thing, we have to be on a special diet and we can cook and eat at whatever time we feel like," Kartari eagerly wanted to sort out.

"Look aunty, why have you said this? When I cook for the rest of the family, why can't I cook for you?" before anyone else said anything, Harpal's wife spoke out.

"We treat you like our own parents, then, why do you think of these distinctions?" Harpal, thus tried to win over his aunt's heart.

"It is not a matter of distinction. Your aunty is right. One day, we have to do all the domestic work ourselves and yet, we are not very old and worn out. We wish to carry on such chores for the sake of our health and rather we can prolong our mutual love and understanding, in this way. If we have a separate kitchen, it doesn't mean, separation of hearts. In the long run, it is you who have to do everything," Banta Singh corroborated what Kartari had said.

"Uncle, you have seen the condition of our house yourself. We have been looking after your house and our own has been reduced to ruins. After the winter, we shall be able to repair ours and then, if you desire, we shall vacate the whole house. Up to that time, if you can manage with the upper room, it will be better. There is a small kitchen adjoining that room also," Harpal suggested in the tone of a decision.

The winter passed off, but none appreciated their sentiments. In their own house, they were staying like strangers! Now the heat of the sun didn't allow them to sit near the clay oven to cook. The dry season of the summer also, like the temperament of their nephews, continued to sicken them and at last, the rainy season set in.

Banta Singh talked of his troubles and hardships, among his fraternity and relatives so that he could get due sympathy but, what was to happen? If something had to happen, it would have happened by now. In his leisure, he discussed it with some but why should anybody spoil his equation with Harpal, for the sake of Banta, a foreigner and almost a forgotten name for the whole village? When he shared all that with his sons in England and asked with slight harshness, the matter was further complicated.

Banta had been relieved of his rheumatic pains but, it had given way to his mental misery. Living in rural climate, his wife, Kartari, also had got rid of her ailment but the atmosphere of the village and their home had started chocking her, instead. The house which they had fondly built, with the sweat of their brow, now had become a burden, instead of giving them the comfort and shelter. When the relationship with his brother and nephews, became devoid of warmth, their life started becoming colder.

Far away in the north, the clouds were gleaming. When the flash of lighting split the clouds with a loud roaring sound, it seemed to pierce their hearts.

"We could have called in the electrician and got the plugs fixed. We could put the fan on. These damned mosquitoes do not let us sleep for the whole night," said Kartari from the adjoining cot.

"Our getting the plugs fixed can wait. First of all, I should request for the meeting of the village committee. Let them not pay us arrears, but for future, their accounts should be straight or they should release my farm land. Today, I had talked to Sarpanch and Bahadur, the son of my old friend. No devil pays attention to what I say, as if I were insane or they didn't understand my language," Banta continued to empty his mind and further added, "Kartari, many a time, I doubt that we have returned to a wrong village. This village does not show even the slightest kinship. Nether the people are, as they used to be when we were here, nor is the simplicity of those good old days. Neither anyone cares for the well being of another, nor does anyone try to be of use to others, nor do the people show the warmth of the previous times. God knows what curse has fallen on this village! No one realise what affection and compassion are! The village has been estranged. I feel like a stranger here. I had dreamed of the sweet and loving life of the village, but now, feel that we should return to England. I admit that lot of things change with the time, yet regret that this change should be for the better not for the worse! To me, this sort of progress or advancement seem going in the negative direction; socially, morally and culturally. We had thought that we would spend a few months in relaxation, but to be honest, I have got fed up with this village. Yes, one time, it was ours but not now."

"I also miss my grand children, badly sometimes and then, think for the sake of our health, I feel like spending some more time here. It doesn't matter if they wish to keep one portion. At least, we can talk to them rather than feeling lonesome. Once we go away, no one is going to pay us a penny. Actually, that is what they want," Kartari, too, expressed her observations.

After sometime, Banta Singh spoke to his son in London to pay a short visit to sort out domestic dispute. From the other end he said, "Dad, I had explained everything to Malkiat's brother Sukhbir. Leave it to him. He will get everything sorted out. Children miss you a lot and let us know if you want us to send tickets."

"Your mum is not feeling at ease and missing you all. If Sukhbir can do it, then, we better return. We have enough money to buy tickets from here," saying this he felt somewhat relieved.

Willingly or unwillingly, they were flying back. Their thoughts were pursuing a question or within themselves, a question was pursuing their thoughts. Where is our home or homeland?

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Chapter 13: **Victims trapped in fourth phase**

Being a lonesome or having a sense of superfluous may be a self-created tragedy or it may not be, however, its victim when trapped in such a misery, suffer emotionally, mentally as well as physically.

For some, an old age can be a blessing, equally enjoyable as youth, but when seen globally, for majority of people, it seems to be a curse. Perhaps, that's why people do not seem eager to go through this particular phase of life. They feel reluctant but helpless. There is no alternative. It's natural and hence, all have to accept this fact.

For those who are all alone, it could be frightening indeed! Somewhat, it is also true that at this stage, material achievements and other temptations of life seem to be bedimming. Hence a person, surrounded by such circumstances, starts to realise the truth behind this saying, 'Health is Wealth.'

I have observed this very closely, being in the company of these two relatives, Banta Singh and Jawala Singh.

There had been many such days in Banta Singh's life, but he was feeling that after the death of his wife, Sawarni, it must have the first day of despondency. For common people, Sunday is a day of social interaction-----a day of excursion and entertainment. For Banta, it was a day of mere extreme depression.

The painful feeling of loneliness was wailing inside him, but these laments had no sound. If they, at all had sound, it was not audible to anybody else, except Banta. He wished that he should have been able to share this quiet pain with somebody. His condition was like that of a crying child who craves that somebody should come, embrace and distract him. He felt that both, old age and childhood were seasons of life, dependant upon the weather of compassion.

After having been awakened, he was not able to sleep as it usually happens in a depressed state. Instead of sleeping, he was repeatedly recalling Sawarni who had been separated for good. He thought that just as in childhood, the child becomes an orphan with the removal of mother's support, quite in the same way, in the fag end of life one becomes orphan on losing the companionship of the life partner.

His mental state had become such as if one were feeling lonely, though moving about in a crowd. There was a pin drop silence in his room, but inside him, there was silence like the one in crematorium, at midnight. For a long time, he had been rolling in his bed. He had his fill of sleep in a few hours. Now, he was not feeling sleepy but, he had to spend the night or was obliged to pass it in reflections of the past. What can a person do in such a situation? He removed the curtains aside and peeped out. On the roadside, the lights were still on. He pressed the bed switch and put on the lights of his bedroom. The

time was four in the morning as yet by the clock, ticking on the bedside table. He felt exhorted to see the time again, thinking that the day was about to dawn.

He went to the washroom, washed his face and brushed his teeth. Thereafter, he came down into the kitchen and put the kettle on to boil water for tea. Holding the cup of tea and sitting in his bed, he started taking hot sips of tea. Since the day his life partner, Sawarni, had passed away, he used to prepare the tea himself. Besides himself, he had two student tenants in the house. After taking tea, he had been going to his other house across the road to have his breakfast, where his son, daughter-in-law, two grandsons and a granddaughter resided.

He could now perceive the light of the day, beyond the window curtains. He moved the curtains aside and at the same time, the redness of the round ball of the sun spread in the room. This redness slowly faded into the white light of the day, as he watched it.

For the past several days, like a routine in this house, he changed his clothes, arranged his untied beard, tied his turban and having got ready to go to the other house, he stepped out. Then, thinking something he stopped short, "No, not yet. It's only eight o' clock as yet. It's Sunday today. They will not get up till nine or ten and this way, I will not be able to get breakfast before eleven or so," he muttered to himself. He thought that, as it is, he should prepare another cup of tea.

While taking tea, he started strolling in the lower room. He felt like going to the Gurdwara (Sikh temple), that day. Many other companions like him, may have reached there. Not only he would be able to exchange his views and share emotions with others to lighten his heart, but also, he would be able to receive some fresh news received from back home, India. Meanwhile, the community lunch would start serving and he would take it there. Here at home, also nothing was prepared special for him. Let the people here at home enjoy themselves. But, the time as yet, is just nine. It would take only fifteen minutes to reach the Gurdwara. Then, he suspected that his watch might be wrong. To remove his suspicion, he went back upstairs to his bedroom, to check the time with that of the clock there, his watch turned out to be completely correct.

He peeped towards the road outside, through the window. Nobody, coming or going on the road caught his sight. At a distance of few houses, he heard the noise of the starting of a car, and then soon after, a white car appeared and passed by before his house. On such a day, a car rarely passes on the road in the morning, except the milk cart. People, tired of race of the modern life, may like the quietness of the early morning. But it seemed to have aggravated the depression of Banta Singh.

Outside, neither the sun was visible nor the sunshine. This English wintry sunshine may not be warm but, it makes one feel its warmth through the window panes. At least, it removes the depression of the weather. Sunshine might have some sort of power to lessen depression of human minds. No doubt sunny weather makes one cheerful.

While strolling in the room, as if to address himself, he said "Oh, Banta Singh, you can see the changing shades of the English weather. Only a few minutes ago, there was a very bright sunshine and in moments, drizzling has started." In no time, the drizzling took the form of heavy rain. The flight of his imagination took him to India.

In Panjab, he had a farm beside the macadamised road leading to his village. For an instant, he would see the rain falling on the slanting dark green crop of wheat. And the next moment, the clouds seemed raining on the fields of maize, cotton and sugarcane. His fancy warbled from above the Persian wheel and the cuckoo of his imagination, started cooing from the mango tree standing amidst the corn fields. Meanwhile, a tenant living above closed the door of the toilet and Banta Singh was back into the world of reality.

It was raining outside and the weather also looked very depressed like Banta Singh's own mind. At length, as if some proposition had struck him, his mind blossomed up like a flower. He thought of going to his daughter's house and gossip there for a couple of hours. Chhindo would also have gratification and it will also console his own mind. Chhindo was his only daughter who lived in the same town, at a distance of about half a mile. Then he remembered, what his son-in-law, Bikkar Singh, had said when he met him a couple of weeks ago.

He had told Banta Singh that he would take his children to safari park, on that Sunday. Banta Singh wished that he also should accompany them. He too, did not dislike an excursion or a picnic. Secondly, what had he seen of life as yet? He moved from the factory to the bedroom and from the bedroom to the factory. This very journey had made him aged. In the whole of his life in England, his world was confined to his own town alone. He was just like a frog of the well.

Now the clouds had scattered and the rain also had ceased. He took hold of an umbrella and willy-nilly, set out towards Chhindo's house. He thought that he was not going to cause any burden on them that might make them shirk. He had sixty pounds in his pocket, quite new, bearing the picture of the queen. Out of this amount, he would give twenty or thirty pounds on some pretext to his grand children and then, they would automatically ask, "Father! Let us take you also along and in this way, I will also spend today's day very well." Entertaining these thoughts, he did not realise when he had approached Chhindo's house.

Hearing the sounds of talks inside, he felt assured that at least they had got up. He knocked at the door and no sooner did his son-in-law open the door saying, "Well, Father, you have come slightly late. If you had come a bit earlier, we would have served potato paranthas to you!"

Banta Singh noticed that they were ready to go somewhere out. They must be going to the safari park – he supposed. The children, while saying hello granddad, took their seats in their car. Seeing him somewhat confused, Bikkar Singh wanted to clarify, "Dad, we had actually planned to go out today." Before he could complete his say, Chhindo

came down holding a handbag and said: "Dad is no alien for us. He will again visit us when we have come back." Banta Singh felt as if he had nothing to say.

"...Well, let it be when you be back." saying these words, he was overwhelmed and two warm tears flowed from his eyes and took shelter in his beard.

"I shouldn't have any complain against Bikkar, but my own daughter ought to understand my feelings," Banta murmured.

"Commercialisation has entered into human relations. Warmth of the family life seems to be fading," he uttered to himself.

Walking on the road, a thought came to his mind, "I should have died before Sawarni," thinking this, he held a deep sigh. Turning towards the High Road, he had lost back in his youth days spent in India when he had a dog and his neighbour, Kabul, who had a horse named Moti. He remembered he was also as strong as Kabul's horse. Working in the fields from dawn to dusk, he never felt tired but, in this old age, he felt helpless. He wasn't so weak but lonesome. He felt as if the people, who have enjoyed extended family lives, are more prone to the pain of loneliness in old age.

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Chapter 14: **Seeing the slaves setting free**

Often I say, 'Forget about your past, focus on your present and make the most of it, if you can make your present worth living; obviously, your future will be much brighter.' In fact, I say that but, it is very difficult to forget the past because it is a part of your life, like a part of your body. I wouldn't be wrong, if I say that this past of our life cannot be isolated or discarded. After all, it maintains some values of our life.

As I have mentioned earlier about Kabul and his horse Moti, let me express it bit further in details.

The affection between Moti and Kabul was not the one between an owner and his possession; rather it was the one between two friends. Therefore, he could express his sentiments in form of a language. However, Moti was an animal. How could he explain what he felt inside him? But the biggest wonder was that Kabul could understand what Moti had to say. Kabul's human understanding helped him to understand the thoughts and the feelings of Moti. God knows how Moti could understand the human language of Kabul. When Kabul looked into the eyes of Moti, its eyes expressed many kinds of pleasures and pains, and grouses and grievances.

It was six years since Kabul had purchased the cart and was carrying the luggage. He was comfortably making his two ends meet. In this connection, he used to express gratitude to Moti by saying, 'My Moti is very kind. May God grant him (it) a long life; it is all due to him.'

He owned a buffalo and a horse, Moti. In his wife's view, both were just animals. But according to Kabul, there was a great difference between a buffalo and a horse. For him, a buffalo was just a head of cattle, but he never considered Moti to be an animal even though it had the form of an animal; and in fact it is an animal. Bhani had never seen Kabul talking to the buffalo, but he daily talked to the horse. Many a time, he took the green grass cut by Bhani, away from the buffalo and put before Moti. Seeing this, Bhani would feel annoyed and say, 'Moti is not going to yield milk that everything should be fed to him.'

'You go and do your work. Don't talk nonsense, for nothing. If Moti had not earned, where could you buy this buffalo from?'

After muttering a little, Bhani would be quite and he would start messaging Moti with a hand brush. Every evening, they would return home tired and worn out, but Kabul would always think of Moti before his own wash up. He would first give fodder and grains to Moti and then, he would think about his own food.

One morning, after taking breakfast, when Kabul was about to yoke Moti in front of the cart, Moti started dragging his feet. Kabul looked towards Moti and it bent his neck.

Then he raised Moti's face up a little and looked carefully into its eyes. He found a sort of helplessness in its eyes. He tethered him again to the peg.

'Why, what has happened?' Bhani asked in amazement.

'It seems that Moti is not fully well,' Kabul told her.

'Who has told you this?' Bhani enquired.

'You tail of a dog, sometimes at least do try to understand the animals; you can't understand them, yet, they understand humans better.' Kabul said in a slight irritation.

'Sometimes, you too, must understand humans. Yesterday, you forgot to bring children's books from the city and they have gone to school without books,' saying this Bhani picked up the sheet and the hoe, and set out from the house.

Kabul held Moti by the bridle and took him to the veterinary doctor. He examined him and injected with some sort of medicine. Kabul was leading Moti and the latter followed him; and the two walked homewards.

Coming home, Kabul started thinking about Bhani. What an innocent lady she is! She considers the animal as if it were an engine made of iron. Being a woman, she should have more of maternal affection and compassion.

Meanwhile, Numberdar, Jarnail Singh approached and asked, 'How do you do Kabul? How is it that you are at home today?'

'What should I tell, Jarnail Singh? Moti is not fully well today and I have just got him an injection.'

'Well, the animal can feel, sometimes, slightly out of sorts. In the evening, do deliver a load of sacks of cane-jaggery (raw sugar).

'Sir, who am I to refuse! But it is not possible in the evening. Yes, if by the morning Moti recovers and then, I shall take this load tomorrow.'

'You feel a bit over anxious about animal. That's why the children of the village keep making jokes about you and ridicule you.'

'Sir, this poor animal is not going to say 'no'. If I lead him now, he will be ready for a round. But I remember my own time in Kolkata when I used to pull a hand rickshaw over there. Once I was shivering with fever and willy-nilly, I pulled out rickshaw on the road. I got a passenger, a fat Lala, as weighty as a gunny bag. At the ascent of the railway bridge, almost every gentleman dismounts, but pitcher like fatty kept sitting on. I had to cover the ascending distance barefoot. Under my feet was the road burning like a hot plate and that time, while pulling the rickshaw I felt like breathing my last. But believe me, that lala had paid no heed at all to my condition. Thus, I, being a man, could never dare to tell that Lala to get down, but this is only a horse, merely an animal who can't speak, you see what I mean,' Kabul tried to explain.

'Friend, what you say is correct. We have never ever thought why the animal does not pull ahead. Whether we yoke him to the cart or plough, we always talk through flogging.' Jarnail Singh got up from the cot taking a sort of yawn and then, he so pulled up his nether cloth as if he wanted to compare his legs with those of the horse.

Kabul remembered the days when he was compelled to pull hand rickshaw to make a living. Those days in Kolkata, he was like an immigrant to bear the brunt of nostalgia, even in his own country. Occasionally, he would think about those people who were immigrating to foreign lands for financial betterments. He was ghostly chased by the memories of his past. He wondered how first and second generations of immigrants face such realistic tragedies; physically living and working somewhere else and mentally and emotionally, somewhere else, far from their families, longing to hear a word from any family member as there were no telephones at that time.

In a town-like city, Kabul used to park his cart near the Balis tea stall, by the side of the bus stand. Just near it, Phattu had his shoe mending and polishing place under a banyan tree. Kabul had only this consideration that Moti can breathe some air in the shade. At the time of his last turn, he got some load of his villagers, and some passengers without any effort. This load included sacks of sugar, oil drums, tins of ghee and bags of cements etc.

Today, it had been very hot throughout the day and close too. Everyone was feeling restless. But now, at the time of sunset, the breeze had started blowing and the weather was bit pleasant. Kabul patted Moti tethered to the cart as if he was saying, 'Come on my friend; now, let's return to our village.'

The tempo drivers had picked up the passengers from the last bus and had set out for their destinations. Kabul was without a passenger this evening and only with some luggage, was about to set out for the village.

After offering a bucket of water to Moti, he was just moving towards the main road when Preetu came and greeted him. This Preetu was a counterpart of his elder brother through a recent marital relationship, in other words he was the father-in-law of Kabul's niece, whom Kabul treated respectfully as a relation. In spite of all refusals by Preetu, Kabul took him to a soft drink shop near the railway station.

Enjoying milk shake, Preetu said, 'Kabul, I need your cart and horse for a couple of days.'

Hearing this, Kabul felt milk shake embittered in his mouth. He could give his earnings of a fortnight or so, happily to some relative but he could not part with Moti.

This being a new relationship, he could not say 'no' either. First, he thought that he could himself take the cart and this way, Moti will remain under his eyes. Then bashfully, he changed his mind and gulping the unpalatable, he agreed.

Without Moti, Kabul was feeling somewhat desolate, not only he himself but the entire house. He passed these two days with great difficulty. He wasn't worried about the cart but was anxious about Moti alone. Then he remembered that Moti's shoes, too, need to be replaced. He murmured as if he was addressing Moti, "my friend, in a way you are still lucky; some other animals never ever have shoes to wear: even steel ones instead of leather like mine. But you are not like me; you are too strong and hence, deserve steel shoes".

On the third day, Preetu's son brought back the cart and Moti, though Kabul had been waiting till late last night. Kabul felt like dancing out of mirth. Forgetting everything, he advanced towards Moti and Moti placed its head in his embrace. Kabul started stroking and soothing him and when he raised Moti's head, he saw the tears flowing out of its eyes.

'No, Moti don't do that. I shall never send you anywhere again. Be quite now, please!' saying this he got his own eyes also tear filled; but Moti continued to weep, putting its head on Kabul's shoulders as if he was protesting, that the cruel people took no pity on him.

Those days left behind far away. And now on the roads, whenever Kabul sees horse-carts replaced by machines, this gives him a sense of relief and pleasure as if he is seeing the slaves setting free.

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Chapter 15: A Sense of Guilt

We have hardly been in Chelmsford for about four years. It may sound very enjoyable or cherishing for some, from certain cultural backgrounds to live amongst a joint family, but now, it is becoming a part of the history. With the changing time and values, one should adapt accordingly. For a long time, Bha ji Malkiat, had started advising us to buy a separate house. Bha ji has a good insight and always regards logic, whereas an emotional person like me, rarely takes things too seriously.

In India, Bha ji would perform plays during election times as he was a supporter of the Communist party. Bishan Singh who was a very dedicated and committed person, as well as a good actor, used to direct these plays. Bishan Singh is senior to Bha ji who lives near my elder son and keeps visiting us occasionally. I remember, once in India, I expressed my desire to work in films and Bishan Singh instructed me, "Young fellow, you are a sentimental person, merely a day dreamer. You have no experience and knowledge about films at all, hence where will you end up? Right in the gutter I tell you." Scratching his head, he further added, "Somebody's dialogue comes to my mind. Yea, ambition without knowledge is like a boat on a dry land! And more importantly, knowledge without practice is always incomplete."

Our house stands at the end of the road. Contiguous to our house, is the house of old Ami, who seldom comes out. The third house is occupied by Charlie Bates and his family. His wife Jeena is a very beautiful and charming, indeed.

Instead of Sukhbir, everybody here calls me Sukh. This evening, James and Barbra are coming to our house for dinner. They go to Indian restaurants, at least once a week. Learning it from my wife, now occasionally, they too, have started cooking Indian food at home. Some Indian fried food may be very tasty, but not healthy at all. I love a balanced and nutritious diet as well as tasty. I hate fatty and overcooked foods no matter how tasty they are.

There was a time once, when the white people had not even tasted the Indian meal. Due to inferiority complex or you can say, lack of self confidence, the Asians would eat their packed lunch hiding in some corner of the factory and I, too, was one of them. If ever, some white man passed beside us while eating, we would take a cover, as if we had been caught red handed doing something illegal. Bha ji too, was one among those people. But now, he is full of self confident. These days, contrary to this, now in the summer, we sit in our back garden and eat whatever we like, without any hesitation. Sometimes, white neighbours sitting in their own gardens often say, "Very nice smell! We can smell it from here." Once, same was a stink for them. Now Indian food is an acquired taste. These days, prominent personalities can be seen enjoying Indian food in restaurants, not only in London but throughout the whole country.

Like me, James also, loves sitting amidst greenery of trees, bushes and bloom of flowers.

It reminds me the words of Simon King, "Human rights are the rights of Nature, we are nature like the plants and rivers; its message is—Live and let live." From my personal experience, I can say that people who spend most of their daily lives in open fresh air, harmonising with Nature, are much more friendly, compassionate and transparent than those, who spend most of their time indoors. And it's a fact, anyone in doubt, is most welcome to challenge it.

I have already laid the tables and chairs for them in our rear garden. Plastic tables and chairs, otherwise also, keep lying here outside. As the bell rings, my wife says, "The white people still are very punctual than us. We had invited them at seven and exactly at time, they have rung the bell."

"What you mean by white people? Do you mean English?"

"Yes, I mean so."

"What about Walsh, Scottish or Irish?" I only say jokingly.

"Yes, no doubt, majority of the indigenous British people are lot more punctual than us Indians." replies Santosh.

As I open the door, James comes in and advances towards outside, and his wife, Barbra, stopped with my wife, Santosh, in the Kitchen. Perhaps, she is observing what type of food is being prepared. Seeing Barbra coming towards me, I say, "Barbee darling! As you come along, can you please bring the ice box from the freezer?"

We have filled our glasses with bear. James bringing his glass close to his lips says, "Cheers Sukh." After a short while, putting the glass back on the table, he adds, "Nothing can be said of this life. Every moment should be cherished and enjoyed." "Don't be a philosopher!" I say laughingly.

After taking a glass of bear, I have just poured the first peg of scotch, when Santosh brings the delicious chicken samosas and a Jamaican chillies souse saying, "If someone wants to have a sharper taste...!"

"Whatever may happen tomorrow, for the present, I will enjoy this hot stuff," says James touching his samosa with souse.

Charlie, living in the third house, was also peeping towards us. At length, while praising the sunny evening, he raises his hand towards James and says, "Lovely day, isn't it?"

"Yeh very nice," replies James.

"Hi Jeena," Barbra also enquires of the well being of Jeena, standing next to Charlie. Then they address me.

Santosh calls me in the Kitchen and says, "I think they also wish to eat chicken samosas. Call them also in. Never mind if they consume some liquor or beer too. What difference does it make? After all, they are our neighbours, a part of our fraternity here, in our local society"

"Why doesn't it make a difference? It does," I just tell her but, I am happy though in my heart of hearts to enjoy the company of Jeena. She is a very pretty, attractive, cheerful and a loveable woman. Many a time, in the summer when I add ice to my scotch, sitting

in my garden, my eyes are always focussed towards Jeena's kitchen door. Without meaning it, I begin to harangue Santosh, "After all, it costs money and it is earned through hard labour. Secondly, however you may try to mix up with these people, they always, try to keep you at a distance. Somewhere or else, a sense of superiority complex embedded in their minds, does get expressed. However, if you wish, I will call them."

"I think, may be they had this sort of sense, but now most of them, through integration, do believe in social equality." Santosh expresses her own thinking.

I cast a glance towards Charlie's house over the garden fence. Jeena is watering the plants. I advanced a little towards her over the broken plank. James and Barbra are observing my movements, carefully; perhaps, they are aware of my inner intentions.

"Hi Jeena, where is the other half of yours?" I jokingly ask her.

"He has just gone to toilet," she replies.

"I don't know, whether you are really so pretty or appears to me so!"

"Thanks," saying this, she smiles and her face becomes ruddier.

"If you are not planning to go anywhere then, please come along and join us. Let us drink, eat and enjoy together," I extend the conversation.

"No, we are going nowhere. Sooner Charlie comes down, I ask him."

After a while, they come and join us. During conversation, James looks around as if poking for something. Whenever he looks towards me, his eyes have a mischievous look.

Santosh, sometimes, goes to the kitchen and then comes and sits with us. Sometimes, she begins to sort out the problems of the children. When she returns after stirring the ladle in the cooking pan, Jeena says, May I help?"

"No, nothing is to be done. Everything is ready. Just let me know when you people want to eat. I shall cook the chapattis within few minutes," Santosh says to Jeena.

"Well, when we have to eat, all depends on the will and mood of Sukh." says James.

These words of James seem to be full of great irony and true as well. I understand his hint that in Indian families, it is the husband's will more than of the wife that has its sway. Secondly, he may have noticed that after drinking, I want to adapt everything accordingly to my own wish. Both ways, he is somewhat right.

We did not notice while drinking that it was ten o'clock. Santosh again, got busy in the kitchen. James and Charlie are rearing dreams of purchasing bungalows in Spain after winning the national lottery. Jeena and Barbra are planning to spend their holidays next year either in Goa or Dubai. It is all due to intoxication caused by whiskey and bear. By the morning, next day, they will have forgotten all this.

The fragrance of flowers is getting dissolved in the environment and making it more charming.

"The food is ready. Shall I put on the table inside?" Santosh calls out from the kitchen.

"Why inside? Let it be here." I shout from outside, staring at the other four faces in search of their opinion and assent.

Santosh starts bringing and laying the food on the table. On seeing the boneless spiced chicken, Barbra says, "Today, I too, will not eat rice. Like Sukh, I shall eat wholemeal chapattis and chicken."

I pick up a chapatti, roll it with chicken and red onion, and begin to eat. Imitating me, all of them follow the suit. After finishing my last peg, I pull the plate before me. They also know my habit that while eating the food or after, I don't drink at all.

"I very much like the smell of green chillies, green coriander and cumin seeds," says Barbra putting chicken in her plate.

"I too," Jeena expressed the agreement.

After finishing the food, Jeena says, "We should be departing now. Sukh does go to sleep immediately after eating."

"I keep telling him that he should move about a little and sleep after lightening his stomach. But he goes straight in to the bed. That's why his stomach goes on swelling," Santosh tries to expose my habit even further.

"Let us have a bit of music. Our food will be digested. I couldn't help it. The food was so delicious that I have eaten three times more," suggests Jeena.

"Well, today again, I propose to dance with my neighbouring lady," saying this, Charlie holds of my wife's hand. After a short time, Santosh gets her hand released saying, "I am not very good at this dance."

"Charlie is really a fortunate man that he has got such a beautiful wife," James looks towards me and winks.

"So far as I am concerned, I like Sukh's wife the best," Charlie speaks from the core of his heart.

It is about midnight. I felt somewhat guilty. It does not make sense to disturb neighbours after ten or eleven. Deep down somewhere within myself, I have a hate for anti-social behaviour. One's entertainment must not become harassment for others. I think within myself.

I have seen the round plate of the moon in the sky, after a long time. Our garden is agog like a rural wedding, back home in India. It appears as if we were sitting among our own fraternity. Initially, we wasted years in this country feeling depressed, for nothing. We were confined to ourselves thinking everyone to be an alien. All these were misconceptions due to different language and lifestyle. One may call it a culture! And where are those, today, who used to be our own? Every Asian settler is looking for the answer to this question!

Another question knocks at the door of my mind. Who is to blame? Perhaps no body! I remember when we wanted to organise a festival of diverse cultures. We approached some African, Caribbean, Sri Lankan, South Indian and Bengali communities to participate with equal access, but none of them showed any interest. They all wanted to beat their own drums, individually not cohesively, may be for some individual interests! God knows! Why don't we want to come out of our communal cocoons?

Time demands transformation, globally, but we are still living in the past. This country offers us so much and we also contribute as much as we can, but nothing mentionable in this context. Strolling in my garden, I am talking to myself. Under the influence of alcohol, my thinking may be staggering; irrelevant or unreal!

.....At night, while I was in my bed, my thoughts were centred on Jeena. Then a sudden diversion, Jeena's being changed into Jeeti, the same footpath going towards the farm house visualizes towards the east, lush green fields of wheat and in the west side, sugarcane crops.

Soft cool of the advancing winter seems very romantic, both in the evening and in the morning. During the day, a warm cosy sunshine! In the sugarcane field stealthily, meeting of Jeeti. Diverting the water into a new crop bed, when Jeeti's uncle struck the spade upside down, forcefully on the bank, to clear earth out of it, I was almost missed my heart beat.

"What has happened?" my wife shook me and ask.

"Nothing, keep sleeping," I reply to her trembling.

"You always dream of horrible things! Have you ever seen some pleasant dream?"

Santosh asks.

"It was a very pleasant one but towards the end, the dammed thing became dreadful," I say spontaneously.

At night, this dream had put an end to my slumber. I started thinking that however, one might try to forget the past, it returns to him, somewhere, in some form or the other. The past can't be thrown away like an old shirt! Those footpaths from the road to the farm houses and that very same village are nowhere there. Their existence has been blotted out. Their place has been occupied by new houses and other people. Still, they can't be obliterated from one's memories! Many a time, rather it seems as if these memories of the past had some hidden meaning and beauty in themselves and should not be unacceptable.

Next morning, going to the library, I have scarcely approached the High Road when I see Jeena coming from the school side. Wearing a light yellow coloured sleeveless blouse, she is looking like a mustard flower. A strange glitter in her eyes grows deeper and she looks more attractive, and fascinating as she smiles. After exchanging greetings, she says, "Sukh if you are free, please do a little favour for me."

"Who will refuse for such a beautiful lady? What is the task?"

"A pipe of my washing machine leaks a little."

"OK, after returning from the library, first of all, I will do that," I start crossing the road.

Reaching home, I looked out of the window of the bathroom and saw Jeena lying on a sheet in the lawn. The round and fleshy thighs of her seem to be packed tightly in her small shorts. Her soft smooth body looks prettier in the black underwear. I made a noise by striking wrench against the window and that made her look towards me. I make a gesture to tell her that I am about to leave for her home. My heart begins to beat faster with a feeling of sort of joy and enthusiasm. I think that after all, I have prevailed upon such a beauty. With a sense of proud, I set out towards her house.

I was not obliged even to ring the bell. She was already standing behind the door. As soon as she opens the door, I enter. She had put on a shirt of transparent linen and had used only one button in the middle. I felt that she had only made an excuse to call me in.

I think, merely it may be my misunderstanding! Then something in my mind suggests me to think vice versa.

The children of both of us are at school and spouses at work; what a suitable opportunity she has created, I think within myself!

The water was leaking just because a nut had been loosened. I tightened it and the leakage stopped.

"Would you like to have a cup tea?" she asks.

"Not anything else?" I ask mischievously

"What else?" she tries to know the unknown secret in my eyes and style.

"A hot kiss, instead of hot tea!" saying this I put my hands on her shoulders. Trying to find the hint of yes or no in her eyes, I take her in a tight embrace.

"May I ask something?" I whisper.

"What?" she asks in a quivering voice.

"Jeena, I find you very likeable. You are so fascinating, I love you really. And I mean it."

"Sukh, please don't be silly," with these words she tries to free herself from my fold and slips away.

"Let us sit here outside in the sun," saying this, she proceeds towards the back garden.

After exchanging a few words, I feel somewhat peeved and return home. I think that it is very difficult to understand a woman. Whenever she meets me, I always find a mischief and a smile of invitation in her eyes! She had, herself, called me in and then, so much of physical exposé and coquetry. After all, what must she be wishing?

Preparing a cup of tea in my kitchen at home, I keep thinking. However, whatever she has done, she has done right. She has given a right direction to my wavering feet.

I have got holidays for a week. I spend sometime in the kitchen as cooking is one of my hobbies and sometime, in the local library. Occasionally, I read something and then switch on tv. Today, it is Friday and sitting in the front room, I am reading a book. Suddenly, the door bell rings and I get up to open the door. I am amazed to see Jeena at the door. Immediately, on entering she asks, "Sukh, if you are not going anywhere, I need your car as *m o t* of my car has expired and I have to go to hospital to see my mother."

Without saying a word, I hand over a bunch of keys to her.

"Thank you, you are so kind," with these words she steps out and then, somewhat in hesitation, she turns back and speaks as if she wanted a promise from me.

"May I tell you something, only if you keep it to yourself, don't pass it on to your wife and also never mention to Charlie either."

"After all, what is it?" I ask.

"It could have been said as a joke or may be, seriously from the heart."

"But do tell me now. Well, I shall not tell it to my wife," I assure her.

"Charlie had one day, gone to drop children at school and met your wife on the road. She seemed to him very attractive and he seemed crazy about her. He said that no one can believe she has grandchildren. He felt like kissing and embracing her. Sukh is very lucky to have such an Indian woman, he expressed."

"Why should Santosh take it ill? Rather she would feel proud and happy. Every woman feels pleased when her beauty is admired," I tell her.

"But some Indian ladies do feel offended," she says gently and then smiles.

"They only do so for show. Just to rise in the estimation of their husbands or others in the family," I say laughingly and shut the door behind her.

It is very pleasant and sunny day today. The blue sky is visible. Last night, it had rained heavily. The quality of air is full of life. Perhaps heavy rains have washed away the pollution in the air, down to the drains and to the rivers.

Going to the post office to get an important letter registered, I see Jeena struggling with her car wheel.

"Oh! It is good, Sukh, that you have come. I can't loosen this bloody nut. I want to replace this wheel with the spare one in the boot, which is as good as new. By the time, Charlie returns from work, the garage will be closed, I must need *m o t* today and this dammed nut is not getting loosened."

I change the wheel for her and go to her kitchen to wash my hands. Jeena brings a towel for me to wipe hands.

"How about a cup of coffee or any other hot thing instead?" she asks.

"Well, let it be some other time," saying this much, I am about to open the front door.

"Please do listen to me, Sukh," then enfolding me, she takes me towards the lounge and without hesitation puts her arms around me. Bringing her face closer to mine, she whispers, "Sukh, believe me, I love you. I like you and I need you as a sincere friend," There is craving in her words, a tremor in physical touch and a severe thirst in her eyes. Suddenly, I do not know how, I am reminded of the words uttered by Charlie, "Sukh's wife Santosh"

I do not know what Jeena may be thinking of me, I shut the door behind me and start walking towards my house a bit ashamed. A sense of guilt was creeping inside me.

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Chapter 16: **Something New**

Who knows they may have sat cross-legged for the first time. It seems that the long rituals of marriage have fatigued the wedding couple also. It is possible that perhaps like mine, their legs also may have grown numb. May not be as they are young and I am old. This comparison seems inadequate. One of my legs has benumbed and at length, I get up with great difficulty, come out to the car park and keep standing there.

Warm sunshine is very pleasant. I think that I should keep standing there till lawans (rounds of marital rites) begin. Just near me, a group of youngsters is having fun and frolic. Even on a small joke, all of them burst into laughter. None of them is cutting an unpleasant remark with anyone else.

Mr Sanhgera hints me to come inside. He belongs to my own village back home. He and my brother worked in the same factory for a long time. After giving *the shagan* (benedictory money), I again, move out to the car park and wait for my family. A white couple also had come and stood in the company of those youngsters. The lady, after putting offering of her share on the palm of an Indian girl and cleaning her greasy hands with tissue, asks an Indian boy, "I wish I could understand your language to know what advice the priest has doled out to the fortunate couple."

"The same things they keep telling to the couple, to be married, that a vehicle of marital life runs smoothly if both of its wheels are balanced. Nothing new and I don't know, whether someone acts on it or not," after removing the handkerchief from his head, the young boy tries to explain to the white woman in English.

"If they do listen and act on it, why should there be such a large number of divorces?" another boy standing nearby says astonishingly.

Meanwhile, Mr Sanghera and his family also come out. They had accompanied by my wife and children.

"Well, how should we act now? Shall we go to the hall or proceed home?" Mr Sanghera wants to know my opinion.

"What would you do at home? Let us all go to the hall. Take your seats in the cars," before I could say anything, our wives say in the tone of an order.

"To be honest, the matter is that I want to avoid alcohol. Secondly, I hate this sticky and greasy food saturated with oil. It may be tasty but not healthy at all. Another reason, these drummers cause headache by the loud sound of drums," Mr Sanghera clarified what he had in his mind.

"Come on uncle, you may not drink but you can dance along with dad. This will be useful for your health. On this pretext, you will be able to take some exercise," my daughter says pulling him by the hand.

"Be a sport dad. You all old people feel shy of being in step with the youngsters," Mr Sanghera's son seemed to support my daughter.

"These elderly people do not have time for the youngsters, like us," when Mr Sanghera's daughter said this, he looked towards me as if he were saying, "Well, I am caught on a wrong foot and have to accompany."

“Naturally, with the age, lifestyle differ automatically.”
“Let us be there for a couple of hours,” I hinted to suggest.

We have occupied a table away from the stage. Families of both of us sitting face to face, start conversing. When almost all the tables are occupied, an old friend of Bha ji makes a gesture with his hand and says aloud, “Here we have some seats. What are you doing there among women? Come on this side.”

“We are quite comfortable here. If we drink sitting in the company of our families, the liquor intoxicates less and one does not lose his balance,” hearing the retort of Mr Sanghera, he becomes speechless.

Seeing the people dancing to the beats of the drums, our feet also start moving automatically. Though this music is less melodious and more like a noisy rhythm contrary to our younger times, still we are trying to enjoy it. Having been out of breath, we have hardly gained our normalcy and we again, feel like continuing.

Since the day, Mr Sanghera’s clothing business has been taken over by his young ones; he has been living as a retired person. His wife continues to share the burden of work at the shop, only because most of the buyers are usually Indian women. All day, they are seen purchasing Punjabi suits, some for themselves and the others to give as gifts to friends and relations. The entire business is being handled by her daughter-in-law and daughters.

After returning from India, now my wife’s thoughts are focussed on Mr Sanghera’s bungalow. Situated on the main road leading to Jalandhar city, it seems as if this bungalow were the dignity of the whole village. Though there are several other big bungalows on this road, yet Sanghera family had made their bungalow much more attractive, spending six to seven lacs of rupees merely on its front elevation decoration.

They already have adequate land in the village. Almost all their relations are living in foreign lands. Their farm house is occupied by the menial workers and now, they alone are responsible for their agricultural work. The family of one of the worker resides in the back portion of their bungalow. It is not easy even to manage and maintain such a big bungalow!

Many a time, I have talked to my wife that we also, own quite a big plot on the same road. Why can’t we too, construct a nice comfortable bungalow? It may not be as big as of Sanghera’s, let it be one third of it. Then perhaps, the young ones also may feel keen to visit India occasionally, and after retirement, let it be our holiday home.

Sometimes, we complain of the fast changing times. And sometimes, we also express a grievance why the time does not change, as we like to see it! It seems to be standing still rather we forbid it to change! The time does not care for us, though we may have an illusion like the one, that the earth is stationary.

As the door bell rings, my wife opens the door and Mrs Gupta enters along with her husband. Santosh has made them sit in the lounge. I get up from the dining room and move towards the lounge.

"How are you Gupta Sahib?" shaking hands with him, I occupied the adjacent seat. "I learnt that you had come back from India and I thought of enquiring after your well being," Mrs Gupta addressing my wife Santosh, starts a conversation.

"Well! I had returned immediately after my niece's marriage. He, my husband, stayed there for about a month after I had left.

What can I tell you about India? Time has changed. These days, everyone is selfish. All are motivated by self-interest. No one meets you without a motive in mind!" Santosh gives vent to her mind, through these complaints and grievances.

"Look! Here too, who comes to you without a purpose? How much are we concerned about someone's welfare or interests?" I express my opinion.

Mrs Gupta gives a turn to our talk and puts forward her question, "All right, let us leave these things aside. You were telling me about starting construction of the bungalow. Have you done it?"

"But who is going to live there?" Santosh puts forward a question, in response to her question.

"Well, all people say that nobody will be able to go back and live there. Nor have we seen many people doing so. All are dying here in UK hospitals. But, whoever goes to India after retirement, on his return says, that he or she is constructing a bungalow! This thing is beyond comprehension." Mrs Gupta wants to assess the situation.

"The people have made a few bucks and they just go on spending them, imitating one another. Show has become a fashion. I say that our people earn just for the sake of show," saying this, Santosh looks towards us as if she were asking to give a greater deal.

She further adds, "The truth is that imitating Sanghera family, my husband also had a bee, of building a bungalow in his bonnet," Santosh expressed herself staring at me. Now tell me, what can I say in response? I think better to keep quiet.

Weeks elapsed and over one weekend, Mr Gupta expressed his keen desire to eat saag at our house. He is well aware that my wife, Santosh, makes a very tasty saag. I brought very fresh greens, spinach, bathu, cholai, fresh coriander and green garlic sprouts to make a saag. Sooner we put these things on the worktable in kitchen, Happy and Richu also arrive. They say, "Dad, why have you brought these weeds?"

I try to convince them that these are not weeds; rather they are concrete health giving and delicious food, as well as nutritious, full of iron and vitamins. That's why I keep telling you that you should keep visiting the Gurdwara, along with your mother so that you get to know about the Indian food.

"Rice curry, chicken tikka, kebaab and chicken samosas, are they not Indian food? We eat out with our friends," both of them try to overwhelm me.

"But, why not prepare at home and eat? Why wasting money outside? This evening, eat here at home and see, you will ask for it, at least twice a week."

"We care about restaurant business, that's why we dine out. You miser guys will never ever change." saying this, they laugh together.

"Dad, you always talk about these old things, tell us if you have something new," both of them, look towards us askance. Mr Gupta looks towards me and smiles gently. I try to derive some symbolic meaning, out of his mysterious smile.

Staring at me, he asks "who is to blame?"

Seeing me quiet, he adds "We simply cannot blame them and we are also not too wrong."

"All I can say, they have every right to live their lives as they wish, and we have the similar rights as well, let's finish here." saying this much, I move towards the fridge to take our cold beer cans.

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Chapter 17: **The Madman**

Mostly, the old people come to this day centre. Where else they go? They come here when they feel fed up, lonesome or dissatisfied with their domestic life. They share their views while being here and exchange their sorrows and pleasures with each other, and have tea and snacks together.

When Bishna enters the room, someone from the group, while playing cards says, "look Bishna has also come! When, I was in India, comrade Bishan Singh used to perform plays during election campaigns, going from one village to another. In those days, it was the way of electioneering."

"What made him mad?" the person next to him, wants to know.

"There is nothing wrong with him. He is lot wiser than we people are. You must know from the history that fools had been calling the wise as mad from centuries," the earlier person tries to tell the other one.

"But last week, somebody was telling that some sort of mental disorder had appeared with his old age. He can not even remember his own name. He laughs, instead of being angry, even when somebody taunts him," the man wearing a cap, seems eager to know the fact.

The earlier man laughs a little and then tells, "he would laugh at the moment when somebody talks about something superstitious. And perhaps, gets angry when the person appears somewhat literate and educated!"

"Let us move over there where Bishan Singh is sitting. They seem to be engaged in heated arguments," the earlier one suggests.

One of the two persons sitting near Bishan Singh in a way of giving suggestion, and the other one as if giving warning, are trying to make Bishen Singh understand something.

"What happened? Why you become so angry?" the man wearing a cap, begins to ask while sitting closely.

"What can be happened, they were discussing about the sage from India, whose film we watched on Sunday, that millions of his followers could not be crazy. The sage must be having some sort of special spiritual powers!" the person sitting next to Bishen Singh explains.

"On this only, Bishen Singh urged them not to regard a person of the age of your grand son, as a spiritual sage! And Jagar Singh got angry, over that only."

"Why to get annoyed at the person who is an old fool?" the man sitting near Jaggar Singh, could not help teasing.

"I was considered a very wise man; when you people used to applaud on my dramas. At that time, you people had only a piece of cotton cloth around your loins. Now, you have started wearing trousers, having pounds in its pockets. And that is enough for you to become wise. As the saying goes that money makes a fool to become wise." Bishen Singh quipped.

"Friends, we have moved away from the real topic. We were talking about the sage from India," one of them tries to alert them.

"However, one thing is clear, that the sage being so young should not get his feet touched, from the people of the ages of his grand-parents."

"Friends, he does not come to your homes, to ask you to touch his feet! You people go

to him on your own to fell flat on his feet, with your families too. The feet of your parents living at your homes, appear hoofs of an animals to you, whereas, you consider the feet of this robust goon as holy ones!" one of the friends of Bishan Singh, gives vent to his fury.

"But, faith is also something. Only yesterday, it was being discussed on Astha Channal that faith has some powers."

"But you are taking blind-faith as faith," the person wearing the cap, replies.

"If there is no crowd having blind-faith, then, how could these hypocrite sages come-up?"

"But how the whole congregation could be insane!" one of them sitting in a corner expresses his surprise, while scratching his beard.

"For God's sake, do not call such a crowd as holy congregation. Let us call them a crowd or something else! There are some good souls in the holy congregation, at least. But, the gatherings at the pilgrimages or at other similar places are mostly of the superstitious people or you may simply call it a crowd of followers without sight. This crowd can make anybody anything; a leader, a religious teacher or a sage! I do not have any grudge against the illiterate and ignorant people like me, I just pity on them. I have grudge against only those, who being educated and literate and still join these crowds." Bishen Singh doesn't want to get his life-long experience of logical views hurt. Everybody has his own truth until the ultimate truth is revealed.

In the meantime, a man with a very powerful personality, starts shuffling through the pages of a Punjabi paper lying on the table. Different voices emerge one by one.

"Mr. Sanghera, tell us also something? Is there any important news from India? What about the elections there? Who is losing and who is winning? Will your favorite is likely to become a minister again or not?"

"Well! Last night, a friend of mine from India called me up. All the people from his constituency are in his favor. Do not know anything about the other areas, but he will certainly win," Mr. Sanghera said while pushing his specs up from his nose with his right hand finger.

"Mr. Sanghera, nobody can predict the crowd? It can make anybody win or lose! And then, it will dance over the victory of the winner as if it has got something for itself! They do not bother to care while firing the crackers to express their happiness, not caring that it would cause to become difficult for others around to breath, due to the pollution created by the crackers. Same happens on Diwali and during other festivals, whether it is India or England. I must say that people of this country are nice, who always tolerate our negative actions with cool mind associated with our festivals and rituals. It's a sorry state of things that such people, living in this scientific age, have become habitual to see miracles of medieval ages. They tend to move towards their past, instead of their future, from their present," evidently Bishen Singh's own thought have an effect on his discussion.

"Well, the people here in England, also fire crackers on the Guy Fox Day. And we have our own history and heritage. Why should we afraid of?" A young man tries to express his views.

"My son, to know about the history is a different thing, but to be tied with it, is entirely a different matter and dangerous as well. Those who tend to be tied with the history can

never look forward. Such people will never go beyond the incidents happened during British Raj, while living and enjoying life in England. To wail upon the past, is like digging out the old graves. History is not to repeat rather we should learn the lesson from it.”

“Bishen Singh also can not help being silent, the same discussion all the time,” someone says.

“Nobody can do anything about the man who is insane?” another voice roared.

“There should also be the enjoyment in life. Be hail and sportive. Everyone, whether black, brown or fair is equal here; this is an open and free country. Then, why should we afraid of celebrating our own festivals?” a man of forty plus age, raises his voice in a challenging way.

“Listen, you brave young man, it is not a matter of being afraid, but, being ill-mannered and discourteous to others. Whether anyone is black, brown or white, there is no question of race and color. Your own entertainment and enjoyment should not disturb peace in your neighborhood. We poor old fools are not much concerned as we aren't going to live for long. It's you and your children, and now this country is your country. If you will live with love, peace, brotherhood and mutual understanding, your relations within this cohesive society will be friendly and peaceful. Brotherhood and peace depends only on these things! One must realize the consequences of anti-social behavior.”

“Well, now please stop this. Why are you speaking this nonsense?” someone interrupts him.

“What, this we are discussing the issue of equal rights. If we do a self-analysis of our own homes, we shall come to know that how much freedom and equality we are allowing to our women folks? There is no social equality in our society. Our society is based on cast and class system back home, and still here in UK” a man sitting next to the fellow with a cap, expresses his views like a question.

“Let us not discuss the matter any further. I have got a view related to the main issue. One of the MPs' of this country calls these 'people' as the 'real people' to whom Bishen Singh addresses as a crowd. This crowd must have some value at least!” the person wearing cap, addresses Bishen Singh in an inquisitive manner.

“First of all, let me talk about the crowd in India. It can proclaim the saline water of sea as sweet. It can give testimony to that the statue of a stone can drink milk. Such crowd has no eyes of its own. It is conditioned to see with the eyes of the exploiters. Such people can see the miracle but, poor-fellows can not do it themselves! They also see the ghosts and spirits, thus wander after the places of such occultist-sages. Such a crowd is always very dangerous. They are valuable only for those few hypocrites and deceitful who can successfully manipulate them,” saying this he runs his speculative vision on some special faces and then, raises his right hand finger as if erecting a pistol at them and again, starts speaking in a serious tone.

“This crowd acts as a ladder for many sages, leaders, and knights and ministers to reach the sky of success, were that these leaders may spare time to think for the rights and facilities of this crowd! Better if this crowd gets the right direction. This right direction is always like a cozy sunshine of winter and contrary to it, the crowd fumbling in the darkness, turns into a killer- typhoon in the end. Such a blind crowd's blind vision

can see God in statues, but never ever in humans!" Bishen Singh appears struggling in putting forth his point completely.

From outside, someone enters with full enthusiasm and curiosity, expecting to attract the attention of everybody and says, "Yeah, here is one film. It is worth-seeing. My nephew's friend has been to the North Pole. It is quite interesting and inspiring.

All of us start watching film by moving the direction of our chairs towards the television. On seeing the snow all around, one incident comes to my mind. Once inadvertently, we entered in a country lane from motor way. It was snowing heavily. We lost hope when our car got stuck in the snow, at a remote place. Meanwhile, we saw some sort of light coming towards us. When it came near to us, we found it was a police car. We were filled with hope and it gave us a new lease of life seeing the police. At that time, my wife said, "let us assume that similarly, if we have got caught up somewhere in India and police came on the scene, it would have surly fleeced as well as humiliated us."

My eyes again go towards the film running on the TV. The golden-brown polar dogs are pulling the sleigh. There is only snow all around and far off. The polar dogs with their hard work and struggle take the sleigh to its destination. All the four persons with a feeling of a victory were jumping with their arms up, like victors.

Bishan Singh could not help it and said, "you tell me first, who is the winner? Those dogs or men! None of them has honored the victory of the Dogs! They are jumping over their own victory only. And the cameraman, too, is shooting the humans only. Even the people in the race courses are far better and more honest as they always say bravo to the horse, not to the jockey! Likewise, politicians are declared winners while riding on the people's horse. The people or the voters are merely a 'horse' for them," after saying this, Bishen Singh laughed loudly with a guffaw.

"Friends, you people say he is not mad but observing his behavior" someone from the gathering said.

"He must have some sort of deranged brain," another voice endorsed the first one.

All those voices were clearly audible to Bishen Singh.

"You nice fellows, if there were no derangement in my mind, why should I be a part of your company? The sage always wanted to live among Sages, and the thief among the thieves." He starts laughing while clapping his one hand on the other.

"However the dogs are very loyal. Yet, these bastards do not recognize the family relations. But, it is equally true for some humans as well! They also want to bite each other on these petty issues," this time all people accompanied Bishen Singh in his laughter.

"You see! Have not I told you earlier? .He just begins talking nonsense while saying something sensible. There must be something wrong with him! Now he has been talking about dogs only!" someone sitting behind expresses himself surprisingly

"Hail the Bullah, the great poet, who has rightly said that dogs have won the battle," he stands up, while seeing the person sitting behind him.

Lot many eyes were looking at him as if he is really a mad! A deep mystery was in his eyes and an impish smile was playing on his lips.

"Are you going?" the man wearing a cap, asked Bishen Singh.

"Yeah!" saying this, he moves towards the outside door.

After stopping for a while, he looks back and says loudly with an obscure smile, "Is it me or you?" Leaving a question mark in their eyes, he stares at some faces and guffaw,

"This time, let it be me, me, an old fool!" And he starts walking out.

About The Book

No doubt, 'Life under One Roof' is a distinctive piece of literature. The chapters of this fiction have an added value, many contemporary works do not possess as they are so deep and challenging, with something new being gained on every reading and this text has been structured such a way contains food for thought, and will make readers devour chapter after chapter.

This reflects the lifelong experience and richness of writer's mind and it is clearly evident, that he has cleverly used literary techniques. The most distinction of this book is that its chapters are individually independent like a series of short stories because almost in every chapter, protagonist is there to proceed along the narrative. Writer's skilful wielding of such very powerful tool, he has used to create this marvellous piece of literature; he creates a sense of realism and immediacy to keep the reader right there, in the midst of the narrative as the characters voice their opinions and ideas.

It provides the reader with an insight of global society, concept of transformation and a sense of respect for equality. Mr Gurnam Gill seems to be a very talented wordsmith, possessed of an excellent command of expression and style; yet for him, English is a foreign language. His works meticulously crafted with extremely evocative imagery and lyrical prose, indeed, are very enjoyable and stimulating.