



Life through The Cracks

by Shashi Saebeel

Shashi writes : "This is an autobiographical story. Since last year, I have been in a dilemma whether or not to fictionalise it. Finally, I came to the conclusion that I must write it as it happened. Because I know most readers do not take fiction very seriously, thinking "Oh, it's just fiction" I decided that I must tell my story without hiding myself behind a fictional persona. I know this is not just my story but the story of many women. I thought that after reading such stories as this, many other girls and women could be encouraged to speak about themselves. Also, I thought that if women writers like me are afraid to tell the world about our own suppression, how can we expect other women to speak up about their suppression ?

Everything in this story is true. The only thing I have changed are the identities of the men, except that of my father."

I am standing behind the window, my eyes sliding above the roof tops and wandering in the fields, which are gold, gray and green. "What are you doing here?" My mother's voice startles me. "Nothing", I say, and quickly turn away. Now she stands there trying to see what I might be seeing. Whenever she sees me looking around, she always suspects that there must be a man somewhere that I am looking at. It's true that these days my eyes do search for Jassy everywhere—just now I was looking around to see if he was in his fields. But I didn't have enough time to know for sure as I had come from the kitchen after my noon meal and had taken advantage of mother being busy in the kitchen.

I stand in the verandah feeling a little embarrassed at being caught doing something that I'm prohibited from doing. I stare at our courtyard but the noon sun is so bright that it hurts my eyes. Mother is still standing behind the window. "Your bad habits are not gone—good daughters sit where parents tell them to but you..." Her scorn is nothing new to me. I bear it all the time but I can never get used to it. My blood boils with rage. I look at her with extreme anger and hate. She looks at me,

then looks away. There is worry in her eyes and a shade of helplessness on her face. She heaves a deep sigh. It is too burdensome to stand in her sight so I move away.

I walk across the room and sit down, supporting my back against the wall. Red tiles of the floor are shining and they feel cool and smooth to my hand. I spread my legs and sit doing nothing but breathing, staring and thinking.

The walls are yellow and dirty, making an ugly sight. They must have been coloured several years ago at the time of someone's wedding or at Diwali. The place had remained locked for, at least six years as Dharm Chand, its owner, had moved to the outskirts of the village near his flour mill. Now for two years we have occupied part of the upper portion of the house—one room, the verandah, small storage space, the kitchen and the courtyard.

This room has two windows, one in the centre of the wall that I'm sitting against and the other in the wall to my left. Attached to this room on the right is another room, which remains locked. Dharm Chand keeps some things in it; I don't know what. But the room has a small skylight in the wall that divides both

rooms. A big chunk of glass in the skylight is missing, through which often, unwilling but compelled, I stare at the darkness of that room and find myself being frightened to think that a ghost is watching me.

The other room to my left is separated from ours by the stairway. It belongs to Dharm Chard's younger brother Hari Chand who does the farming. Actually, he lives downstairs with his wife and three children. The upstairs room he keeps for himself mostly, except for occasional visits by his wife.

Hari's room also has two windows; one opening towards the fields and one towards our room which is exactly like ours. If both windows are open - his and ours – then both sides can see half the portion of each room. Hari's room is behind our verandah. One must go through the door of the verandah, then make a U-turn to go to his room.

I am counting the wood shingles of the ceiling: one, two, three, four; suddenly, my eyes are diverted. I don't know what I'm seeing because I'm thinking—thinking that I haven't seen Jassy for several days. Last time I saw him was when I went to Mhindro's to get some buttermilk. I was crossing the street when I saw him coming.

I became nervous and started to laugh. Then I flew inside Mhindro's house. Thank God, I thought, that her house was just across from ours.

When she saw me she said: "What happened? Why did you run?" "Nothing", I said. Then I got worried. What if some one had seen me acting that way? What if mother was looking down in the street? No, she was busy cooking. But she could have been spying on me as she often does when I go downstairs even for a few

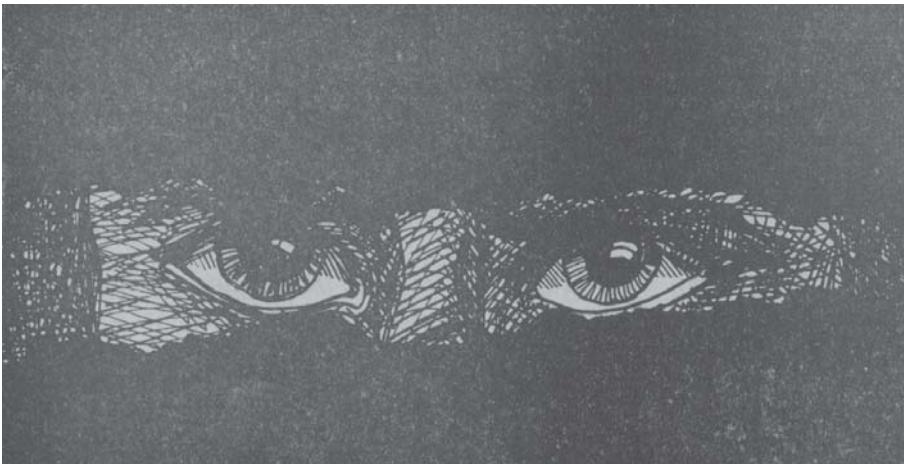
squeak and threaten to break. One day, very slowly and carefully, I managed to open one of the panels a little more and was very happy to have a broader view of the street. But when mother came in, the first thing she noticed was that there was too much light in the room. Then she noticed that the window was more open than it usually is. She looked at me and said: "Why did you open the window? Why were you looking outside?" Then she forced the panels back to their eternal

my face glued on the panels for a moment, but the street remains empty. Perhaps, Jassy is gone to town. Or he might be in his fields. But I want to keep on looking at the street. The view of an empty street is better than staring at the walls, the ceiling, the floor of the room. There is hope in the street but there is nothing in this room except my anger, my tears and deathlike stillness. I'd better check about mother.

So once again I rush back and peek out. Seeing her in the same position as before I go back to my viewing. Soon, I see several buffaloes coming. Behind them is Khudu with a slick in his hand. He hops with it a few times like a frog. He used to study with me in school but when we were in the fourth grade, suddenly, he stopped coming. Then we found out that he was working for Kirpal Singh, taking care of his cattle.

He must be taking the buffaloes to the pond. When they will be in the pond, he'll be having fun: riding on a buffalo in the pond or standing on the edge, throwing rocks at them and in the water, catching frogs, hopping on the stick, climbing on the trees or sitting under them. I'd better check again if mother is still sleeping. Who knows when she might decide to check on me?

The fan lies on her chest and over it rests her right hand. The fan and the hand slowly rise up, then go down, up and down, up and down. Her face is straight as it was before but her eyes are closed. She looks very calm. The thought that she must be sleeping causes a strong whirlwind in my mind; the type that often occurs in the fields during the summer season. Hurry! Hurry! Do something! I tell myself. Don't waste time, she doesn't sleep like this every day. I must take advantage of this godgiven opportunity. But what can I do? Can I run downstairs and go to Seeto's house to see her? But that is a risky thing to do. She can wake up before I even reach the bottom step. Perhaps I can go in the courtyard and have a good look at the surroundings and at the street below. But I cannot do that either because her face is towards that direction.



moments. Next time I meet him like that I'd better act normal, as if I don't even know who he is.

I want to see him. I want to see him right at this moment. He might be standing on his rooftop, even though it's not very likely because this time in the summer he doesn't expect me to be in my courtyard. Sometimes, in the mornings, when I'm pretending to be busy folding the bedsheets in the courtyard and then moving the beds to the walls, I steal some glances at Jassy's rooftop. Often, he stands there pretending to be looking around. But the truth is that he stands there only in the hope of seeing me.

I might catch a glimpse of him passing through the street that runs below our house. I want to look through the back window whose wood panels are shattered with age and weather. Despite my mother's constant efforts to close it fully, it remains somewhat open. Its hinges are rusted and when you try to move the panels, they

position and before leaving said: "You cannot be trusted even in the room." Hearing that made me so angry that I wanted to hit my head against the wall. But I did not want to create a scene and give her an excuse to stay near me. So I told myself: "Don't! Don't! Don't!" It wasn't easy to calm down but I controlled myself that day.

I stand up to go to the window but before that I must check what mother is doing. So I move near the door and very cautiously peek out. To my great relief, she is lying on the bed, her head a little high, touching the verandah wall. She looks at the yard and then at the ceiling above her. She is also fanning herself in lazy motions with the peacock embroidered fan that I had made last year. I leap to the back window and thrust both my cheeks in the middle of the panels. First, I look at the roofs that face the window to make sure no one is watching me. Then I look in the street. I stay in the semi bent position, with

Perhaps, she is only dozing, which means she could wake up with the slightest disturbance around her. She might be pretending to be sleeping and waiting to catch me redhanded. She does look sound asleep though. If indeed that is the case then I must be very cautious not to wake her up.

I wonder if Hari is in his room? I should see. I stare at the closed window—mother always keeps it closed. Fortunately, it has three cracks in it. Before placing my eye on one of the cracks that gives a good view of Hari's bed which lies with the wall across his room, once again I remind myself to check about mother.

I'm disappointed to see that there is nothing going on in Hari's room today. One day, when I was alone in my room and mother was busy cooking, as a habit of exploring I placed my one eye on this crack and couldn't believe what I was seeing. Hari was sitting on the edge of his bed stark naked and was playing with his penis. My heart jumped to my mouth and it kept beating violently. The scene excited me to the extent that for a second, I found myself out of breath—but I clung to the window desperately. Just then I realized that he was also staring at my window. The thought that, perhaps, he knew that I was watching him frightened me. So I moved away. However, I couldn't keep myself away from the crack and kept coming back to it again until he had ended the play. Also by then mother had called me into the kitchen. "Come, cut some onions to fry the lentils. You should have done enough studying by now."

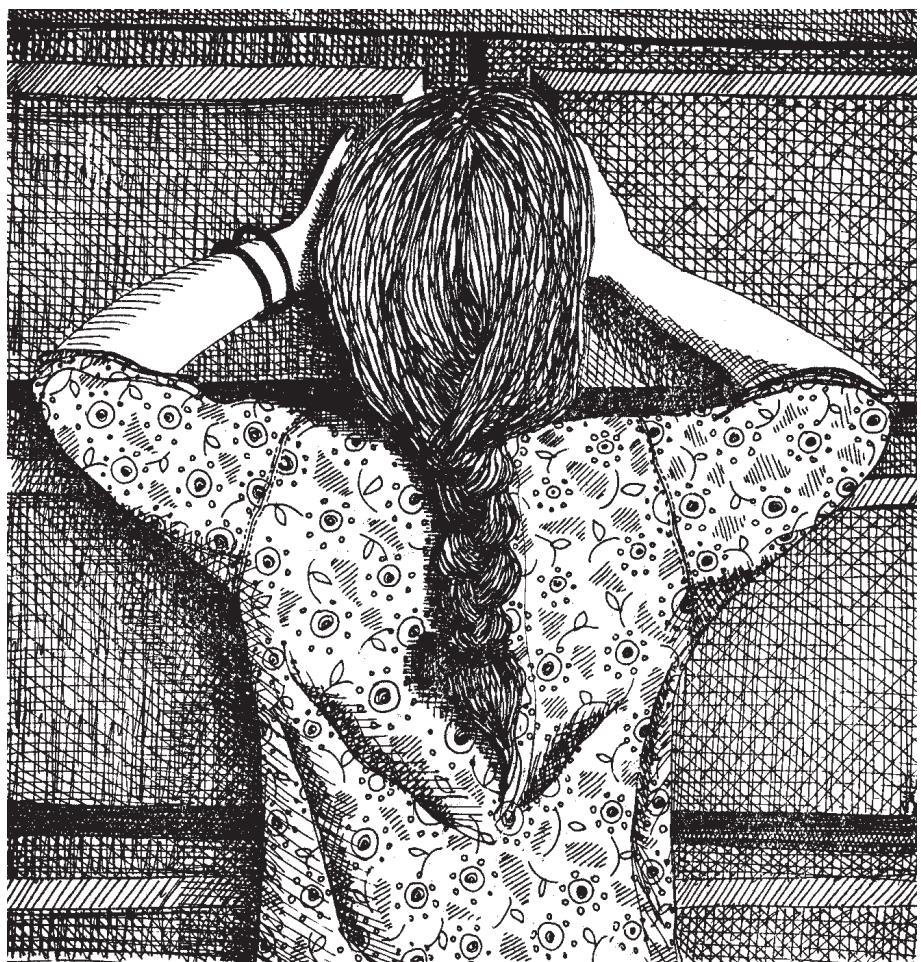
Since that day, it has become a routine for me to peek through the crack whenever I get a chance. I loathe Hari for exhibiting himself in front of me like that; yet, I find it entertaining. When it goes on I keep telling myself: "I shouldn't be seeing him doing that." But I find myself going back to the crack again and again. I am also aware of his intentions. I know, he wants to lure me into having sex with him. It must be one of his such efforts that one day, when I placed my eye on the crack I saw him having sex with his nine months' pregnant wife. She

lay under him like a huge drum with her legs clinging around him.

Hari's sexual acts do awaken a sexual desire (which is often very strong) inside me. But fortunately, I find him very ugly; when he looks at you the corner of his right eye rolls away somewhere, making it look almost white. His buck teeth are so yellow with stains of black that it looks like he hasn't cleaned them since his birth. His hair stands on his little head like a rooster's comb. His voice sounds like the

happen if mother catches me in action, then places her eye on the crack to see what I was seeing. Then, in the late evening, when father comes home, if she tells him about it? I know, if that happens, he'll beat me black and blue and then shift to another house as he had done before when he suspected that I was interested in Jassy, who was our neighbour then.

I used to see Jassy every day but I never paid attention to him because I wasn't interested in him then except for a



cawing of a mountain crow. He looks more like a brute to me than a man. I can't stand the sight of him. And I thank god for making him so ugly. Otherwise, I'm afraid he could have strangled the bird even in its cage.

I am in great danger of getting caught while I watch the play. I hate to think what'll

few months before we moved to this *haveli*. It is several streets away from Jassy's and, worse yet, we live in the upper storey of it. Now it's harder for me to slip out in the street and I'm prohibited from even looking out of the window.

Jassy is so handsome. There is no one like him in the whole village: Roop, Balbir,

Koni, not even Bachan—no one. He has the most beautiful eyes, big and dark even when he doesn't wear *kohl* in them, teeth so white and shiny and they make him look so attractive when he smiles. I love his dark curly hair. It is so long and thick that it makes a nice bun on his head. He likes to show off his hair to me. It used to be that every week when he would wash it, he would make several trips back and forth in the street with his hair let loose under the pretence of drying it. Any clothes that he wears suit him so well too. What I like best on him is the parrot green turban, white kurta and black and white checkered *chadra*.

I wish I could dare to look up at him from close just once. I have never seen him from close because I'm too nervous and shy when he is near me. Also, when I can see him, it's usually too dark to be able to see his face clearly. Still the sight of him makes me happy. Even the thought that he is somewhere not too far from me is consoling. Sometimes, in the night when he is returning from the fields, I hear him talking to someone in the street. I get so excited that I wish to leap to the edge of the roof to see him. Of course, I cannot do that because that time mother and father are always near me. One night, when feeling very sad I was lying on my bed. Upon hearing Jassy's voice I almost jumped out of my bed. Then, realising my helplessness, I only stared at the stars and went to sleep sobbing.

No, no, no, I don't want to cry now. I want to look out of the back window again. Jassy might come. He might have already passed by; I should have checked.

After peeking out at the verandah where mother is still sleeping, I go back to the window and again put my face between the panels. Some stray dogs are running around. Soon I abandon the window and start to think what else I can do that I cannot do near mother. The golden time is being wasted while my mother sleeps. I think about looking in the mirror. So I take the broken piece of mirror out of a book that I always use for this purpose and start to look at my face in it. The thought comes

to me that it's risky to hold the mirror like this in my hand. So I grab my notebook from the only shelf in the room that holds my fifth, sixth and seventh grade books. After placing the mirror between the pages, I sit down to have a thorough look at my face.

Let me see—my eyes are big and long. I do like them. I wonder what Jassy thinks about them? My skin colour is too dark. It would have been better if it was lighter but it's not as dark as some girls have. Seeto is much darker than me. I hate these zits on my face! I don't like my nose much.



It's too wide. Why didn't I have a thin nose like some do! I study my nose again and reluctantly decide that it looks OK. It could have been worse, I tell myself. I like my hair the way I fix it; parted in the middle, combed back and braided with a *parandee* that has pink and green cotton thread flowers at the end. I would like to have a tattoo in the middle of my chin like several other fashionable girls of the village have, but my parents will never allow me to do that because they believe that such fashions belong only to the women and girls of Jats and Majbis.

I hear the bed creak and quickly hide the mirror in the book and start to read the page that is open in front of me. I'm trying

to hear if mother is coming but at the same time I am pretending to be reading. It is my English notebook. As a part of my seventh grade work, I translate sentences from Punjabi to English in it. Sometimes I have to do it sitting near my father but sometimes he tells me to do it on my own and later show it to him for corrections. I read: Mohan is a good boy. Mohan goes to school. Mohan reads a book, Mohan eats a mango. Mohan plays with his friends.

I read the second and the last sentences again because just a few days ago I was given four harsh bat-on beatings—two on each palm—for omitting 'to' and 'his'. Every time father teaches me he beats me for every little mistake that I make and I often make mistakes. I try to study and memorise things but as soon as I sit near him and see the baton lying at his side I get too scared and I forget. The lessons always end with my hysterical cries from the beatings and his warnings of the future consequences if I do not improve.

Oh, how I wish I were a farmer's daughter! The girls that belong to those families have so much fun. They go to the fields and to each other's houses. They talk, embroider and sing together. And they make those beautiful fashions that win the heart of every young man that looks at them. Even the girls of Majbi families, despite their poverty, are more fortunate than I.

I'm kept in this prison because my father is a school teacher and because of his position he is highly respected by the villagers. So I must not do anything that can tarnish his image. When it was suspected that I was breaking the rules every effort was made to maim me. I'm supposed to do nothing but read, do some household chores and stay in this room. I hate my life. And I hate these books! I hate everything in this house. Sometimes I wish I could commit suicide but then I think about the outside world, how beautiful it is—the streets, the fields, the trees, the vast sky, the flight of birds, handsome boys and beautiful girls—I start to hope that some day, I will be free and be part of that world.

I want to look out of the window again. So to check on mother I get up to go near the door. But just then I see her shadow on the threshold. Nervously, I start to flip the pages. The mirror slips out and falls on the floor. She looks at it, then at me, then at it, then at me and says : "Why? Does your face look different from the last time you saw the mirror? Thousands of times she looks in the mirror—thousands of times! Instead of wasting time a person can do useful things; read books or do some household chores. If god had given me the gift of reading I would have read all day." Her sigh hisses in the room.

Feeling ashamed, I keep staring at my feet and also a few times steal glances at three little pieces that lie on the floor. Now I pick them up carefully and throw them in the trash. I'm already doing that before

she even finishes her sentence. I would like to keep them but now I have no choice but to throw them. Perhaps, I can get a chance to steal them later. But what if I don't? I get up holding all three pieces and a few tiny splinters on my palm. Mother turns her back to go. I quickly thrust one piece in a book and follow her out of the room.

"You make tea and I will clean the dishes." I nod to her suggestion and go into the kitchen.

She is rubbing the dishes with ash while I'm making the tea. I look at the angry fire in the hearth and then at my mother. I'm thinking about her: she has nothing in her life except the daily drudgery of cooking, cleaning and waiting for my father, who comes home in the night, and leaves in the early morning. For all these

years, ever since I remember, she has rubbed her forehead in front of the pictures of her gods and goddesses and has begged them in tears to give her a son but they seem deaf to her plight. And for 20 years she has not seen her parents who went to Kenya soon after her marriage. Now every time she sneezes, she starts to cry believing that they must be talking about her. And, worst of all, I disobey her.

I feel like a criminal. I should try to be a good daughter. I should do only what she wants me to do. I look at her and think: mother, I love you. I should never do anything to make you unhappy. But I know these feelings that often possess me of pitying mother and feeling guilty, will not last long. I stare at the purple blue flames that are burning so calmly now.

