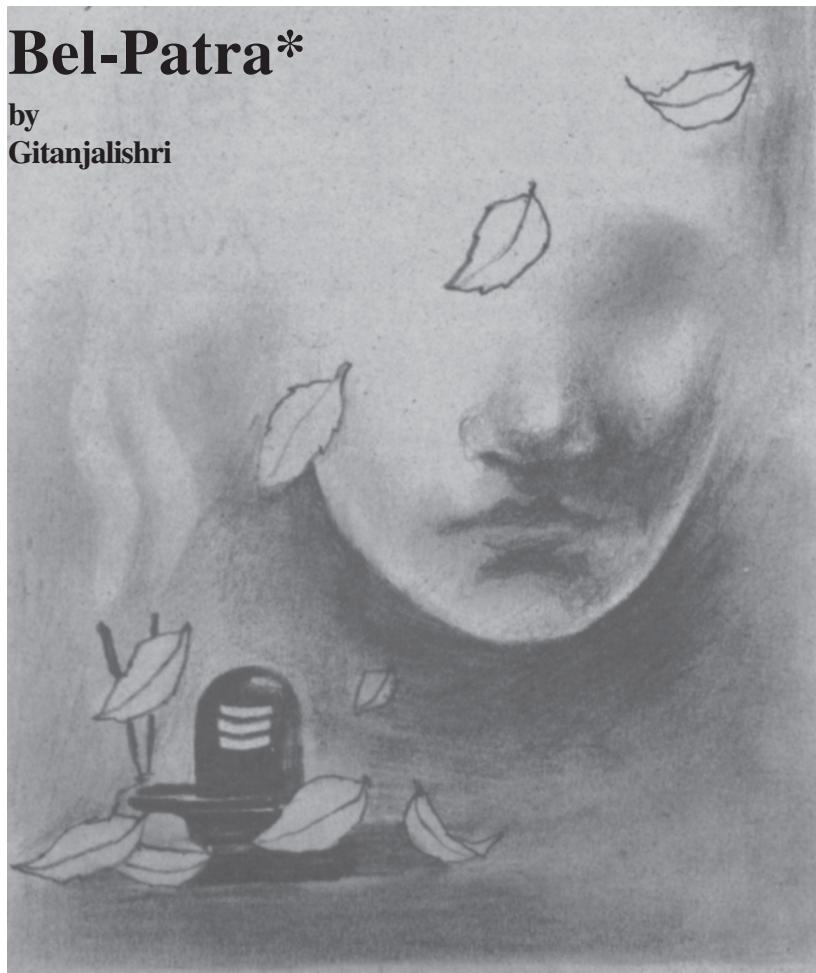


Bel-Patra*

by
Gitanjalishri



AT the vegetable market, Fatima stepped in a wet, sticky substance. "Ugh..." She jerked her foot away in disgust.

"It's nothing. Relax," Om said, bending down to look. "It's only cowdung."

For some reason a wave of anger shook Fatima. "Look, cowdung may be pure for you. For me it is as disgusting as horse dung."

Om was shaken to the core. "Fatima, you will go mad. If you go on like this, every gesture will acquire one of two meanings— Hindu or Musalman." "Think about it," Om pleaded in a voice wrung with pain. "The swamp you are sinking in is still soft, you can get out of it, but Fatima, if you do not stop yourself now, you

will get bogged down and stuck. You will not be able to move, you will become as if paralysed..."

Both of them returned home on the scooter.

Shanno Chachi was in the house. "Here, son, I had gone to Shirdi, take this *prasad* of the Sai Baba. Daughter-in-law, tie on this thread."

Fatima quietly tied on the thread. There was a strange glitter in her eyes. That evening she opened her suitcase. Her mother had kept a pink and green tinsel edged cushion and prayer mat in it. Fatima spread them out under the window, said her *namaz* and turned down a corner of the mat.

At night, Om gently put his hand on Fatima's shoulder. Fatima turned her face away. Om came closer and said: "Fatima, what is this you are doing?"

Fatima jerked herself away like a wounded creature: "I am not doing anything. The pot calling the kettle..." Her voice rose to a shriek.

Something strange was happening to Fatima. As if hysteria and nothing but hysteria lay hidden beneath a thin covering. So long as there was silence, all was well, but at the slightest sound the covering moved and a scream burst out...

Om pressed her hand gently: "Darling, what am I doing? You have started looking for a hidden meaning in everything. You take offence very easily. Earlier, we used to laugh at everything." Tears spilled out of Fatima's eyes. "Don't talk of those days. We were different then." A sob shook her and she buried her face in the pillow. Om embraced her tightly.

"Let me go, let go." Still crying, she struggled to free herself from his arms.

"No," Om said, tightening the embrace. "No, Fatima, how can I let you go? Please - you refuse to understand..."

The truth was that he too was not able to understand what was happening. His brain refused to work. A wave had swept him out to midsea and left him to flounder in unknown darknesses. Why was all this happening? What was this happening? He was unable to comprehend it.

Holding the sobbing Fatima to his breast he lay still in the dim moonlight. The moon was gesticulating on the cabinet standing next to the bed. A college photo of Fatima was dimly visible there. A thin girl in jeans and *kurta*, with a long plait, a smiling face, mischievous eyes. How bold Fatima was in those days. And fearless. And rebellious. She had fought with her father in the hostel lounge: "Society, religion—don't threaten me with these. Even if the whole world accepts a wrong law it will not become right."

Together, they both had faced everyone. They had bravely torn up and thrown away the anonymous

*Leaves offered to Shiva

letters threatening their lives. Om had lost his job. He was accused of being arrogant and of misusing office equipment for his personal ends. Both of them had laughed at this along with their friends, because Om in fact used to occasionally bring home paper from the office to type his articles. One storm after another arose. The uproar spread through the town. Fatima's father put her under lock and key. But she jumped through a window and ran away, and they got married.

Om sighed deeply. It had seemed as if a fearful phase was over. A dangerous story had come to an end. But somehow the end of that story had become a new beginning.

When his eyes opened in the morning, Fatima was saying the *namaz*.

“What is this?” Anger set him ablaze. He pounced on the mat and dragged it away, and pulled Fatima to her feet. “What are you doing?” he asked, grinding his teeth. “This is the last straw.”

“Let me go.” Fatima’s voice was trembling. Om was taken aback at the fixed resolve in her eyes. Fatima jerked herself away and sat down again.

At breakfast, both were silent. Om would lower the newspaper only to take another morsel. When Fatima began to pick up the empty plates he could not stop himself.

“Wait.”

Fatima stopped, without turning her head towards him.

“Go,” he growled. “What’s the use of talking when you have decided not to listen even before you have heard me out?”

Fatima went into the kitchen, her *sari* rustling loudly. She really was not willing to listen to anything. She had vowed to centre all her pain, all her repressed feelings on this one point. On this identity of hers. Because she felt that no one recognised it, acknowledged it. It was either tolerated or insulted. She had come to realise her own being. She would show who

she was. Om’s hand was on her shoulder once again. “Fatima.” His voice was tearful. A tremor ran through Fatima. She could not bear Om’s tenderness. This was the way he managed to move her. His hope would change to a belief that whatever he wanted was being accepted. She did not want this softness. Shout at me, hit me but...

“Fatima, think, why don’t you understand what you are doing? The whole world will rejoice, will say they knew this would happen - how could oil and water blend? Why don’t you come to your senses? We have loved one another — beyond religion. Why have you decided that we must be caught in the false whirlpool made by the world? You are determined to make us into Hindu and Musalman. Fatima, you are mistaking poison for an ointment. Please, Fatima, please, why do you want to fall into the pit that we struggled to get out of? We had become a source of strength for those who fight against injustice — a symbol, a symbol of victory.”

Fatima was stung into retort. “Yes, yes, we are symbols, nothing but symbols, dead symbols, like the black wheel on the tricolour. Om, I am a human being, not an angel. Do you hear me? Do you understand? Listen, Om, I want my world, a human world, do you understand? A world in which there are different kinds of relations - distant and near. I don’t want to live by the support of half a dozen intimate friends. Om, Om, you are a fool. Life cannot be lived in an intimate circle. This constant intimacy - everyone so close, each knowing everything about every other. Om, I feel suffocated. One has to be somewhat distant in order to be able to breathe. I want all that we do not have...”

Getting worked up, Om said: “What are you referring to as ‘all’? Is this the way to get that ‘all’? Fatima, you will lose yourself in the bargain. What you are thinking of as ‘all’ are lifeless

symbols. You have become afraid..”

Fatima jerked herself away and left.

Truly she had become very afraid. For no reason, a wave of uneasiness would run through her body. At night, she would awake and familiar sounds — the drops falling from the tap, the window gently rattling in the breeze, the distant trucks on the road, would make her peer into the darkness, frightened - what are these, who are these?

Sometimes she would dream. She went into her mother’s room. Ammi was quietly working, preparing to go somewhere, a look of peace and equanimity on her face. And she would be throbbing with the desire to talk to her, to listen to her. But Ammi would not speak. Fatima would begin to break down in terror, in suffocation, begin to scream. The mould of her face would break in that scream.

Suddenly she would wake. This peaceful, quiet, wrinkle free, just-awakened face superimposed on that screaming, distorted face—she would be even more frightened. Fatima sat on a chair. Benumbed.

Her courage was shattered. She did not want to know the results of what she had done. Enough of the fight for ideals. She felt as if she no longer had the strength to raise her head. Every plant needs soil in order to grow, needs air and water. She had begun to wither. Om used to say she had no right to bend before every gust, to be so weak. Once one has defied society one must grow on barren land. Else why not have clung to some tree or wall like a creeper?

Enough of these empty phrases. Fatima’s head was buzzing. She felt she would rather face this weakness of hers in some other life. Right now, all she wanted was a place of her own, an identity of her own. She was yearning for her own people.

Someone rang the bell. Fatima raised her head. It was Shanno Chachi. It was Monday. Chachi came every

Monday to perform a *puja* in Amma's name.

Amma had stayed away from them in anger for two years. But which mother can stay away from her son forever? Soon enough, all her stiffness melted, and she began to visit her son's house. That was when Shanno Chachi had begun to visit as well. Amma began to love Fatima very much.

Sometimes, Shanno Chachi would say, rolling her eyes: "Well, your daughter-in-law has a very sweet voice. Otherwise, I can tell a Hindu from a Musalman by the voice alone." Amma stroked Fatima's cheek and said: "My daughter-in-law is not a Musalman in any respect."

Fatima asked: "What is this mystery in voices?"

Chachi answered, gesturing with her hands: "Musalman women always have harsh voices, like men, heavy. Haven't you heard that gardener woman?"

Fatima retorted at once: "Forget voices — Hindu men are just like women — small and weak."

Later, Om and Fatima had had a good laugh at this with their circle of friends. Om's five foot seven inch manhood was called in question at great length. Fatima named herself Fateh Khan, the musician, and sang a spirited song.

Such incidents occurred frequently and provided the friends with food for mirth. They would be at one in expressing amazement at the strange ways of the world. Om's father used to say that if you come across a snake and a Musalman, you should first kill the Musalman and then the snake. Om would also relate the joke about the

Bania who was sitting on a Pathan's chest and kicking him repeatedly but also constantly crying and lamenting his inability to stop the kicking because if he did so, the Pathan would get up and dash him to the ground.

Sometimes, Om would tease Fatima: "Come here, Musalti, let's see how your body stinks. Water is a deadly foe to you, isn't it?" Fatima would coquettishly move away: "Be off, you infidel. Throw two drops of water on yourself and sing a song about cleanliness. Pious fraud!"

Their other friends would join in: "No, sister-in-law, forget bathing. Fortunately, it is so hot that even you have to bathe. But what about the stink that every carnivorous animal emits?"

"What? What is that nonsense?" All would laugh. "Does our cow ever smell bad? Never. But tigers and Musalmans?"

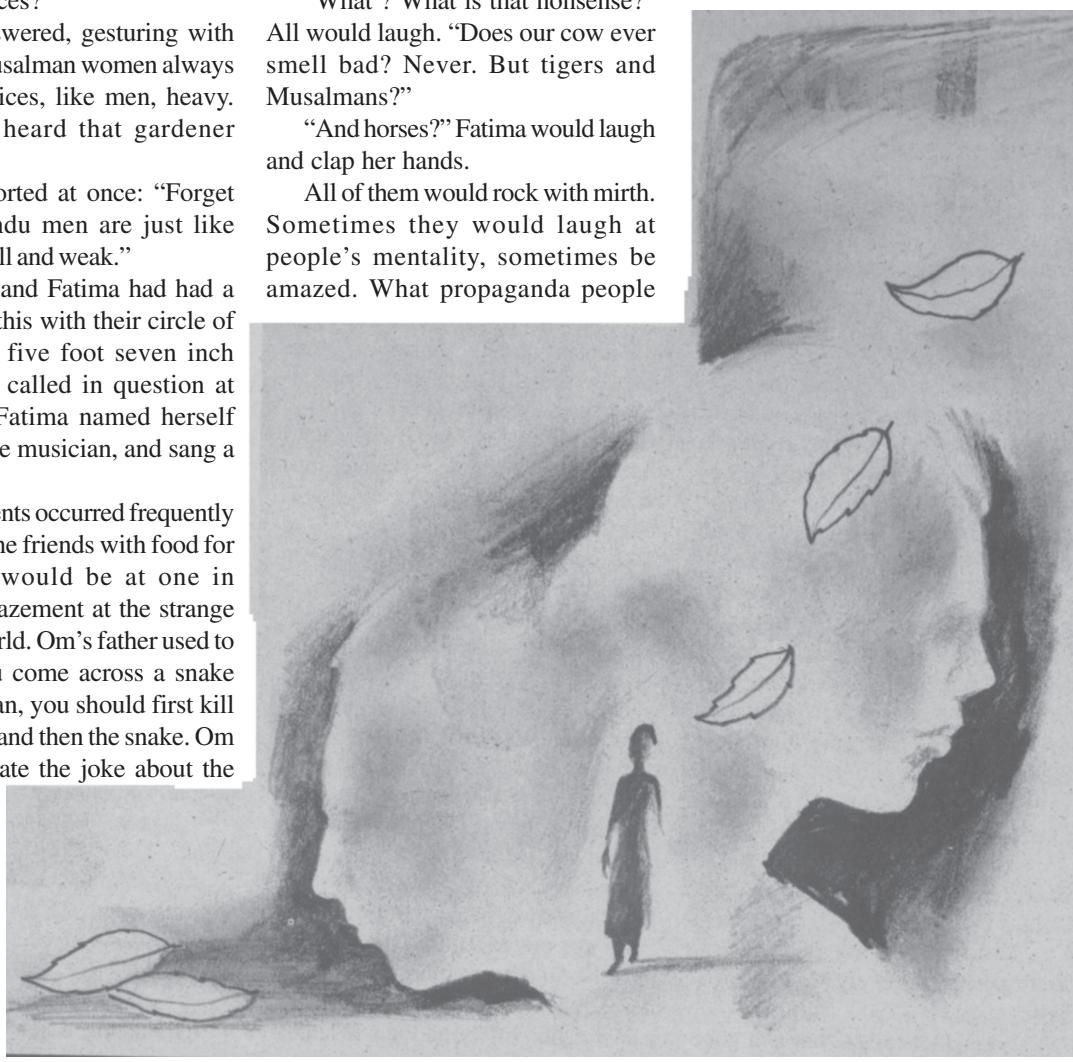
"And horses?" Fatima would laugh and clap her hands.

All of them would rock with mirth. Sometimes they would laugh at people's mentality, sometimes be amazed. What propaganda people

spread, what nonsense will they not accept?

But Shanno Chachi would hurl taunts dipped in honey. She had to be set right. Amma never talked that way. Once she had made Fatima her daughter-in-law she showered nothing but love on her.

Then suddenly she died. Om was as if broken. He would remember Amma and cry like a small child. Fatima too would begin to cry, missing Amma. Then she would think of Ammi and Abba too. Who knows how they are? Sometimes she would hear some news of them. They have gone to visit Khalujan. Nadeem has got married. So and so has been operated on for a cataract. And so on. Fatima was



completely cut off from them. What if something were to happen?

Om had a picture of Amma's framed and hung it up. Shanno Chachi set a picture of Amma's favourite deity, Shankar, in a niche near the photo. Whenever she came she would fold her hands there. Gradually, that became a *puja* corner. Parvati and Ganesh also appeared. A brass tray with a *shivling*, Ganga water, an incense stick and a lamp was placed there.

This worship was somehow so connected to Amma's memory that Om never objected to it. Fatima and he would also participate in the *arti* and, at Shanno Chachi's bidding, would take off their shoes or slippers when going to that corner.

It seemed to Fatima that Om would grow restless if Shanno Chachi did not come for many days. On one such occasion she asked: "Shall I change the flowers?"

Om was silent for a moment and then said: "All right, Amma liked it."

Fatima bathed and then covered her head as Chachi did. She put roses and jasmines on a banana leaf, washed them and brought some *bel* leaves for Shivji. She bathed the *shivling* in milk and lit the lamp, offered the flowers and leaves.

Acry rose in her heart: Amma, Ammi, Abba...

The next time Chachi came she asked: "Who performed the *puja* here?" "I did," Fatima replied.

Chachi did not say anything. But she began to come every Monday regularly.

"Daughter-in-law, has Om gone to the office?"

"Yes, Chachi."

"You haven't taken off that thread, have you? Don't take it off, you will have a child."

"We'll have a child when we want to, Chachi, not because of the thread."

"Well, naturally, when you want to," Chachi said, taking some *ghee* from

the *puja* niche to make *halva* for an offering. On one Janmashtami, she had also put up a pageant of Krishna's birth in the niche below. Then Fatima made a waternut *halva* that she had seen Amma make. In the evening, when she served it to Om, he asked: "Did Shanno Chachi make it? You? It's not so easy. One can't learn to make it in a day."

Shanno Chachi completed the *puja* and left. Fatima too set out for the bank. The pavements were very crowded. Fatima felt as if she were getting in everyone's way and as if everyone was irritated with her. Weighed down by a sense of guilt, she would move to the left, bend to the right and then suddenly stop—let the crowd go by.

She had begun to feel intimated by crowds. Fearful of people. When she saw acquaintances she would either not recognise them or, if she did, would pass by diffidently with a confused smile, uncertain whether they recognised her, whether they wished to recognise her.

Om would get annoyed. "When we go somewhere, you don't even try to talk. People will think you are arrogant because you are of the Khilji family, of royal descent."

"Then don't take me anywhere," Fatima would resolve the issue.

Om would usually go alone. He was tired of constantly explaining to Fatima that people would misinterpret everything, would insist on misinterpreting everything. The other day, Manchanda told him that Bala had said: "See, that princess didn't turn up. She must be thinking that our son's birthday is only a pretext, actually it must be a celebration of Durga Puja. Whether you like it or not a Musalman is more a Musalman than anything else. We always go to the Siddiquis' place for Id, even though we know that they slaughter cows on the sly."

Om and Fatima knew from experience the way people enjoy talking. As soon as it was heard that they were planning to marry, the whole

world had become ambassadors of their gods, and also protectors of Om and Fatima.

"How can we sit and watch when a decent boy is being ruined?"

"That witch won't agree to anything less than a *nikah*"

"How dare that so-and-so abduct a girl of ours? We'll see to him."

Even poor Amma's death became an occasion for gossip: "There you are, they had a *nikah*, the boy's religion was taken away, the mother wept herself to death."

Manchanda told everyone that in 1971 Fatima's father was known to have been a Pakistani agent. The opposition to the marriage was just playacting, actually he had married his daughter to an infidel in order to help the enemy. As if FBI files were sewn up in the Dunlop pillows and mattresses manufactured by Om's company!

Fatima encashed a cheque and came home.

In the evening, Om came home early. "Let's go to Damru Park."

When they reached there, both of them sat under a big tree, leaning against its wide trunk. Fatima began to play with a branch lying fallen on the ground.

Suddenly, for no reason, a picture flashed into her mind of a street dog raising a leg and urinating on that branch. With a scream she dropped the branch.

"What happened, what happened?" Om was startled.

"Th...that..." Fatima looked away with enlarged eyes, and then burst out laughing. Laughter bubbling like a stream.

"Fatima." Om embraced her.

Laughing, Fatima began to cry.

"Om, I don't feel good. I don't feel good at all."

"What's wrong, Fatima? My life, be happy now, everything is going well. You have even started going to Ammi."

A telegram had come from Abba. He had been admitted to hospital. He

was seriously ill. In extreme anxiety, Fatima had rushed to her parents' home for the first time after marriage. There was much crying and weeping. Her father recovered. But Muharram had started and Fatima wrote to Om: "Abba has returned home. He is out of danger but Muharram has started. I will be able to return only after it ends. It does not seem right to leave now."

As soon as they met a quarrel erupted. Om was very angry: "We had agreed to have nothing to do with religion, not to get into its coils."

Fatima was surprised: "How can you talk like that, Om? I have nothing to do with religion. Abba was ill. Ammi felt better since I was there. My praying with her gave her some relief. That's all. I haven't broken any agreement"

"Wonderful! Om turned red with anger, and taunted her: "You keep the *roza*, join in the *matam*, and then innocently ask what you have done wrong? Then why shouldn't we have performed a *nikah* to make Ammi feel better? What was wrong with that?"

As if deep in thought, Fatima looked at him. After a brief pause, she said calmly: "Yes, perhaps it would not have been wrong. It would have made no difference to us but Ammi and Abba would have retained their honour. They would have been able to keep up relations with us. I would not have been forced to be cut off from them. I was not even able to attend my brother's wedding, because of your — Hinduism."

Om was stunned. "What, two days in that atmosphere and you have lost your mind! Was it the *nikah* alone that

I refused to perform or was it any kind of religious ritual, whether in temple, mosque or church?"

"Very good," Fatima interrupted. "Now you will talk about *pheras* and the temple. It was not the temple which was dishonoured, in our case. You know very well that in our society it is the girl who is dishonoured, the loss is hers. The boy only takes — like your Hindu religion—spreads a shadow over long distances, fosters others in its royal shade — or poisons them. But the best is that you are unaware of your own spreading out, and if the other asks for a little protection, a little space, you are enraged and begin to demand a share in that too. Don't make a fool of me. What did you change or lose?"

Om raised his hand as if to hit her: "So these are the arguments you are going to use now? You want to accuse me of having abducted you? Now you're afraid of taking responsibility for what you agreed to do?"

Fatima began to cry, but continued to speak. "Agreement? Had you left me any option? Either come to me like this, or else go, get lost, die. Is it so easy to leave?"

"Fatima," Om shouted at her. "Don't falsify our past like this, don't pollute our love."

Sitting in Damru Park, both sat caught in the real and artificial knots of the past.

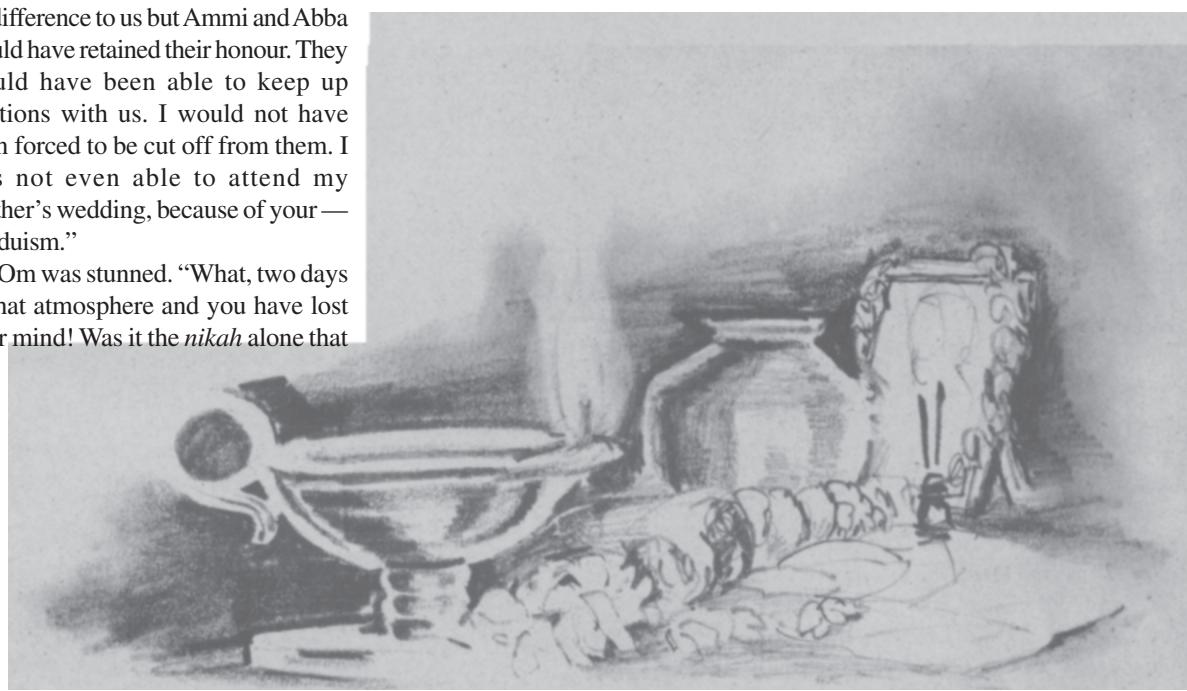
Om took Fatima's head in his lap. "What is it now? Now you go every year to spend Muharram with your family and pray there too."

Fatima replied tearfully: "I go, that's all. What relationship have I been able to maintain with any of them, what am I able to give them? Om, it was society I had fought with, it can revile me, boycott me, I can bear that. But to be separated from mother and father..."

Om was lost in thought. Is there any society part from mother and father? What society is that?

In a faint voice he replied: "No, Fatima, we cannot complain. Remember what Jagdish uncle said."

Jagdish uncle used to teach Fatima English. He was the only elder who had attended their wedding. Before the wedding, he had also talked to them: "Look, don't underestimate the might of this society. Be sure of your attitude towards it. You will be spat upon,



besureof it. If that will upset you, then rethink now. You may wear a smiling mask before the world but will be ground to powder within. If you can endure it, if you have the courage, then go ahead, all of us are with you. These artificial distinctions can be erased only if you children erase them, but be sure you understand — you will have to let go whatever goes from you — name, family. Don't mourn the loss."

"Fatima," Om took her head between his hands. "You defeated society and now your steps are faltering?"

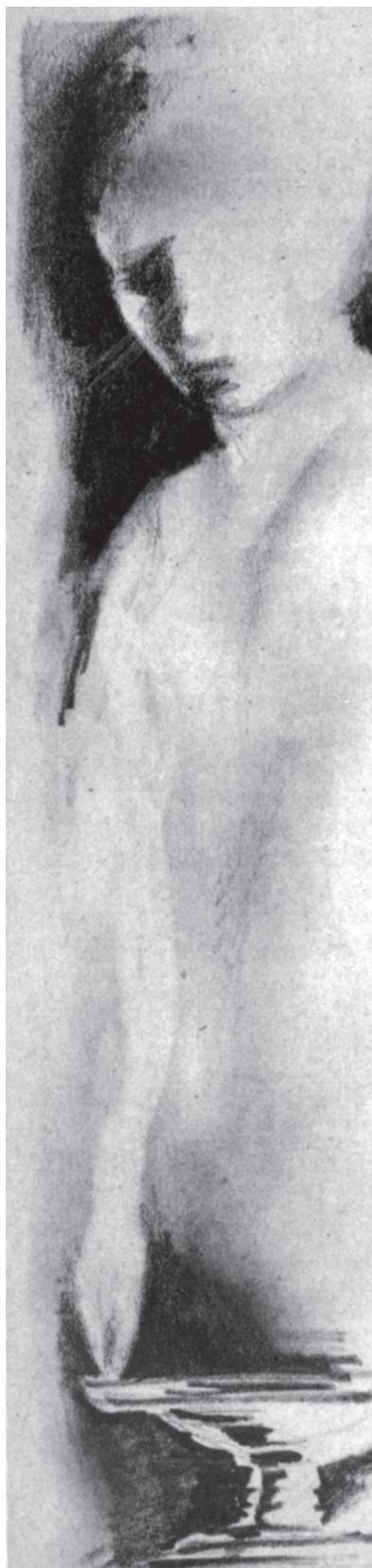
"What difference does it make to you?" Fatima removed his hands, "Your mother, your relatives, all remained yours. You remained your own."

Om was somewhat irritated. "If your Ammi couldn't accept you despite wishing to do so, that is her weakness. Why are you cursing my mother?"

Fatima was upset. She sat up. "You cannot understand. You are a man, a Hindu — what need you fear?"

"Ugh." Om held his head in exasperation. "Go on, talk that way now. Once we have risen above society's worthless laws then why measure ourselves by its norms? Man and woman, Hindu and Musalman?"

"That's easy to say," Fatima's anger grew. "You have risen above and separated yourself. You always had the option to do so. But it is I who was the target of society's arrows at every step. Even the sweeperess questions me, she does not dare open her mouth in your presence. That educated wife of your bosom friend still talks to you politely as she always did, but does not even say hello to me. Why doesn't someone ask her—if she dislikes what we have done then why be so underhanded as to make it obvious only to me? As if it is only I who did it all, while you are a poor innocent, pure



and stainless. Even the washerman deliberately delays the work I give him." Fatima began to sob.

"Forget it, Fatima," Om rebuked her. "Did we ever expect anything else from people? We have always observed their cruelty, their narrowness. Forget them. Why destroy yourself in these small battles?"

"But now I understand," Fatima shrieked, unable to control herself, "that these small battles are the only real ones. It's easy to fight the big battles. We fight them with pride, we are ready to die in sheer defiance. But these small battles — disgusting as those among insects, eat one up like white ants, make one hollow. They are so small that it becomes hard to think of them as connected to the big battles for self respect. The big battle is yours, you can fight it and enjoy the big victory of the big battle. Even a defeat there enhances arrogance. But.....I.....these small battles.....have left me no time for the big...."

"This is our defeat, Fatima. There is no reason for us to be defeated, you..you...." Om began to stammer.

"I don't want to know any more. Stop it here." Fatima was in torment.

Om's heart cried aloud. Fatima, you will drown. Both of us will be wiped out. We are encouraging injustice by our weakness. The unjust will rejoice — they will delight in holding us up as an example, evidence of their theories.

Somehow — to be saved — Jagdish uncle — what to do, where to go?

To leave the city? To go away for a while, for a rest? Ooty? A second honeymoon?....

It was to Ooty that they were going that time when they had met that fat woman who had been terrified at the sight of a *mulla*. The railway authorities had converted the ladies' compartment into a general compartment. Fatima and Om were



travelling in that compartment. Om was still on the platform and Fatima was sitting inside with their luggage. In front of her sat a fat woman loaded with jewellery who screamed "Ladies, ladies" as soon as she saw a *mulla* and his group entering the compartment. When Fatima explained the situation to her she turned pale. When the *mulla* had deposited his group and luggage and gone out for a moment, the woman whispered : "Daughter, this is a dangerous affair." Fatima consoled her: "No, there are lots of people here, what's there to be afraid of?" But the fat woman grew more and more agitated: "No, daughter, all these people are 'M'." And then, looking around fearfully, she proceeded, gasping for breath, to recount all the wicked ways of these people. The list of their misdoings was endless. Fatima argued: "I have some idea too, I am 'M' myself." The fat woman must have spent a sleepless night. Early in the morning when Fatima was lying knotted up and shivering with cold, the *mulla*'s son, about 14 years old, got off the upper berth and said: "Didi, take this shawl, I have two." The fat woman was watching with fearful eyes.

"Come, let's go home". Om said,

taking Fatima's hand. At the gate he stopped her. No one was around. Om looked into Fatima's eyes and saw only darkness there.

"Fatima, let's go somewhere. I'll take leave. We'll go to Ooty. Fatima, I want to see you happy, green and flourishing again...."

At Om's niece's wedding, Fatima had worn a green sari. Without thinking, the words had fallen from Om's lips: "Where did you get hold of this Musalmani colour?"

Fatima's lips had trembled, "Om, be quiet, be quiet this minute." Om wanted to tell her that he meant nothing amiss by what he had said. These reactions, these words, have settled into his unconscious without his knowledge. Somehow they spontaneously come out of him. Om wanted to once again green Fatima's anguished heart with a 'Musalmani green.'

"Smile, my life."

Fatima's eyes were full of knots. How to open these knots that have become too entangled? Om felt that whether one tried to pull them in order to open them or left them to tighten, the consequence would be the same — they would break.

It was time for the *namaz*. Fatima went inside.

Once again Om could not restrain himself from reacting. He leapt forward and pushed her. "Say clearly that you will get into the morass of religion and I should not interfere."

Fatima was as if always ready to erupt into anger: "And what about you, getting the lamp lit?"

"I — I get it lit? Have you lost all sense of true and false? Should I tell all visitors that when they come into this house they should not take their god's name?"

"No, don't. Don't say such a thing to anyone. Not to me either."

Om could only look at her, stunned.

After turning down the corner of the prayer mat, Fatima went out again. She began to walk fast, as if running. But not as if running to get some work done, to catch a train, rather as if running away from someone. Scared. Bewildered. As if she had tightly tied every pore of her face to some unrest hidden within her, so that no feeling should be visible, no one should know. Like something tied too tightly with a strap, her face, growing ever more taut, shrank out of shape.....

(Translated from Hindi by Ruth Vanita. First published in Hindi in *Hans* September 1987) □