



“Begum”¹

Ibn-e Sa'id

Introduced and translated by
Shama Askari

Introduction:

M.H. Askari alias Ibn-e-Sa'id was a veteran journalist and a political analyst. He was born on 12 December 1924 in Ludhiana, in undivided India. His father Professor Mirza Mohammed Sa'id, was a distinguished scholar serving as the principal of Government College Ludhiana, at that time. M.H. Askari wrote under the pen-name Ibn-e-Sa'id from 1945-58. His work was published by leading literary magazines such as *Saqi*, *Naya Daur*, *Mah-e Nau* among others. He passed away in 2005 in Karachi.

Ibn-e-Sa'id's work was largely forgotten. It was under the aegis of Dr Asif Farrukhi that I embarked on a journey rediscovering Askari's writings, and discovered two manuscripts of his unpublished novellas as well as numerous short stories in several magazines. A compilation of his Urdu short stories titled *Intikhāb* Series, and his novellas *Mehvar* and *Raushnioñ kā Sheher* were published by Oxford University Press, Karachi, in 2017.

Ibn-e-Sa'id received his early education from the Anglo Arabic School, Daryganj, Delhi. After clearing his Matric exam, he continued for

¹ Translated from “Begum” *Māh-e-Nau*, Karachi, December 1954 (pp.29-42)

a couple of years at the Anglo Arabic College. He then moved to Lucknow and completed his BA from the University of Lucknow. He returned to Delhi in 1944 and joined the Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) as a Second Lieutenant. He was associated with this department till the end of the Second World War. He was briefly posted in Singapore and was present during the Japanese surrender. I am including here a translation of a section of his biography which was published in *Naya Daur* in 1950.

Real name: Hasan Askari. (In the presence of an accomplished writer; I thought it was better to write under a pen name...)²

Profession: Journalism; I was a War correspondent and observer and I traveled from place to place. I saw practically every country in the Far East. A year after the War ended my travels came to an end in Japan. After the War I worked as a journalist for the *Statesman* in Delhi as well as for the radio. And again, for the last two years I have been working for the Department of Public Relations.

Total Assets: There are a few stories in the memory of my long voyage. For example, “Hiroshima” and “His Four Corners” are memories from Japan; “Sniper” from Indonesia; “Lava” from Singapore; the long story “A Wall” which is included in this edition is a memory from Japan. Apart from these are a few other stories which are related to that unusual and extremely interesting class called Anglo-Indians of the subcontinent. Most of the stories were written towards the end of the war, and some after. Three or four one act plays have also been published.

Literary Outlook: From a very young age I had developed a very firm view about literature (This point of view concerned the status of man and his relationship to other fellow beings and in fact, to the entire universe) I have always tried to give this point of view a place in each and every story, but up until now, I have not been able to solve the riddle. Nor have any of the critics and friends who have personally critiqued my work through these journals, till date, claimed that they have found a glimmer of this humanist approach! Anyhow, I am particularly grateful to my critics for never labelling me a plagiarist. Perhaps the reason for this is that all the characters in my stories have been personally known to me at

² Muhammad Hasan Askari (1919-1978), literary critic, scholar, linguist and translator. He translated western literary, philosophical and metaphysical work into Urdu, notably classics of American, English, French and Russian literature.

some point in my life; in fact, some names and addresses are still safe with me! Having said that, I suppose I am revealing my literary secret!

In a critical study, “Urdu Afsāne ke Farogh meñ Sāqi ka Kirdār,” (Anjuman Taraqi-e-Urdu, 2005) Dr Sajjad Hyder Pervaiz mentioned the importance of rediscovering Ibn-e-Sa’id:

We need to pay attention to him, he is a unique writer with a high moral standing, but because he was confined only to *Saqi* he did not receive due attention from critics and researchers. (quoted in Dr. Asif Farrukhi’s Preface, translated by me)

According to Dr Asif Farrukhi “It is incorrect to say that Ibn-e-Sa’id’s work was limited to only one magazine; but it is correct that he is unique.”³

Ibn-e-Sa’id wrote a memorable biographical essay on Quratulain Hyder, who was a close friend. It was published in *Nuqoosh*, Lahore, Biographical Issue Number, 46-47 (January 1955) along with her essay ‘Footnote.’ Quratulain Hyder introduced her biographer:

His name is Lieutenant Commander Askari, and we dabble in literature etc; and like many other extremely capable and eminent people, he too prefers to remain incognito....

Ibn-e-Said had written about her:

Like *Cinderella* in the fairy tale, Annie is aware that she has lost her glass slipper... One wonders how many young, modern-day writers, poets, novelists, and artists are in search of glass slippers!

Ibn-e-Said was an enigmatic figure. He was possibly the only South Asian army officer to have given us a colonized person’s perspective on World War II through his writings. Through the lens of his War stories, we get a parallel narrative of what it was like to be a non-white officer, fighting a distant war for the Allied cause, defending those who in turn were his oppressors. He was a humanist who spoke about the destruction and mental agony inflicted on people belonging to different races and communities. His work details the horrors of war, peoples suffering and

³ Translated from “Intikhāb Ibn-e-Sa’id;” *Urdu Afsāne, Tartīb aur Intikhāb*: Asif Farrukhi, OUP, Karachi, 2018 (pp. ٣)

the ways in which millions were put in situations over which they had no control. I compiled and translated his war stories into English as *Hiroshima and Other Stories*. They were published by Lightstone Publishers in 2022.

‘Begum’ is a story close to my heart. It is set in Delhi; the year is 1947. The story recreates the cultural ambiance of the city and captures the fear and uncertainty surrounding those who were persecuted, not only from ethnic or religious points of view but also from those of social class and cultural oppression. What makes this story poignant and relevant even today is that nothing much has changed. It points out how we may have rid ourselves of the colonizers and the oppression they inflicted, but we now wear their mantle ourselves. I suppose we must, like Begum in the story, turn to the *Diwān-e Hafiz* and look for a prophecy to guide us through these turbulent times.

There are of course, losses in translation, and I concede that the translation is not word for word, but I have tried to the best of my abilities to keep the text sacrosanct and present it to the reader as simply as possible. My twenty odd years of experience as a stage actor and storyteller makes me acutely aware of the rhythm of speech. Every writer has his or her rhythm of writing and I have tried to follow that cadence as closely as possible. “Begum” is a remarkable story written under trying circumstances, more than seventy years ago. It is a story which needs to reach a larger, more varied readership.

Begum

“Draw a protective circle around yourselves.”

Begum’s melodious voice echoed. Her voice always stood apart; there was a sweetness in it, as though, there was a tinkling of anklets in the background. Perhaps that was also the truth. In spite of her age, in spite of the flaccid white skin of her arms, in spite of the layer of gray covering her deep blue eyes, there was a tinkling of anklets in the background. Silver anklets which astonished most listeners.

Softly, Begum began reciting the *Ayat-al Kursi*, the Quranic verse that guarantees protection; her eyelids closed gently over her deep blue eyes and a tender smile spread across her lips; everyone listened to her whispered recitation in silence. At the end, she drew an imaginary circle

in the air with her index finger, and then she softly clapped her hands thrice; for a few moments a hushed silence fell on the large hall, the only intrusion was the sound of people's breathing.

There was a deep silence in the hall.

There was silence in the walled courtyard outside, the door of the courtyard was closed, but there was silence beyond that as well. In the branches of the ancient *peepal* tree in the courtyard were myriads of nests. Suddenly a startled bird would flutter its wings, leave its leafy shelter and dive into another, the sound of its fluttering wings fading away, and the deep silence would resume.

I looked at Begum again — her eyes were no longer anxious, and her smile had deepened, but the rest of the people still seemed panic stricken. I thought to myself that Begum was a strange woman, she still seemed calm and carried a hint of a smile while the rest of the people seemed agitated. Then inadvertently, I felt calm, and gazed at Begum's face.

Begum had said, 'If you draw an imaginary circle, then everything becomes alright. The heart finds peace, it has been told that those who draw the imaginary circle are blessed by the *panjatan*, the five holiest personages in Islam, and one remains in the shade of Allah's protection.' It seemed as if Begum's words were like balm; people drew strength from them and for a while their worries seemed distant; the clamour in my mind too fell silent.

There were twenty or twenty-five people in the hall. There were many women from this neighborhood, who sat with vacant eyes. Some of them were gaudily dressed as if in their panic they had simply stepped out of their homes exactly as they were. Their clothes were edged with tarnished gold and silver lace. These flashy, expensive clothes were now crumpled with numerous creases and had lost their glitter. The constant use of makeup had left these women's lips dry and their cheeks rough; at this point, the lack of it made it all the more obvious. This crowd also comprised chubby young toddlers and slender young girls who had not yet reached puberty, but their faces were characterized with a certain harshness. Often these boys and girls would become oblivious of their surroundings and talk among themselves, they would sit in corners or around the pillars of this hall and play childish games, but when the

women who accompanied them fell into that awful silence they would go and huddle around them.

There were three middle-aged women squatting near Begum. The way they sat and their mannerisms indicated that they were of base stock. One of them was nursing an infant. Every time, she became animated and started gesticulating, throwing her hands about, the baby would lose his grip on her breast and begin howling, and the woman would shove her nipple back into his mouth without bothering to so much as cast a glance at him. She would ask: “Sister, I want to know what is going to happen now?”

“You wonder what will happen?” interjected her companion who was sitting rather uncouthly, her pajamas pulled up above her knees. Stroking her knees, she continued: “What will happen?”

“Exactly what is meant to happen, what else?” A third woman replied with a rude laugh. The other two smiled. The woman continued: “Anyway, this doesn’t concern us, we ran a business here and we will run a business wherever we go.”

But the nursing mother seemed uncertain and continued: “I wonder what will happen,” and the second woman continued stroking the rough skin on her knee.

... And then what happened was that the storm that was brewing, away from Begum’s thoughts, started writhing and suddenly exploded. One, two, three, four! Four shots were fired in rapid succession, and they skimmed across the top of the *peepal* tree scaring the sheltering birds. The nursing mother and her companions fell silent, their lewd smiles disappeared. Immediately after the shots were fired, the sound of running feet could be heard outside – as if someone was running for his life, people were chasing this man and shouting slogans. The sounds of many running feet confirmed that there were many people outside; we wondered who they were chasing and creating such pandemonium, and who they would target next. The women sitting in the hall drew closer to Begum, but Begum’s face still carried a hint of a smile. She said: “Keep us in your care, oh pure *panjatan!* We only have you to protect us.” Then, in a louder voice, she addressed the women who sat around her: “don’t panic, there is no reason to panic, this calamity will remain outside our protected circle.” Nevertheless, people grew more anxious, and I thought again that

these imaginary circles were useless, Begum's incessant prayers were also worthless, at such moments when one's mind is taken over by some demon even the great saints become ineffective. Great lions become weak, and at this moment those people who were chanting slogans and firing shots were surely possessed by some demon goddess, and the storm continued to swell and churn and tighten its grasp on us. And Begum continued to flicker her soft, velvety eyes, and whisper her prayers.

Gradually the noise faded away, the sound of the footsteps receded, the sound of the bullets reached the horizon and drowned too. Begum's prayers were answered. Her imaginary circle once again kept the storm at bay, and I thought once again that Begum was a strange woman. She had spent her life in sin, yet her prayers were swiftly answered.

Begum's haveli was in the oldest, and most famous part of the city, and it held a certain significance. This old fashioned haveli had been constructed on a plinth and stood apart from the rest of the buildings surrounding it. The tall gates had two white plaster pillars on either side, decorated with figures of angels and cherubs painted in blue. These celestial beings seemed to be travelling in a caravan, borne aloft on the backs of two stone elephants, and because of these elephants, the haveli came to be known as the 'Haveli of the Elephants.' This haveli was at a short distance from where we lived, and when I passed by it as a young boy, on my way to school, I would feel a very strange flutter through my entire being. This was always a very strange experience.

Begum's haveli stood at a slight distance from the bazaar, in a narrow lane. On either side of the bazaar road, stood old fashioned buildings. The ground floors of shops teeming with shopkeepers busily engaged in trade, through the day. The upper levels housed old, archetypal flats with ornate balconies. On the doors of these balconies hung curtains made of long chains of beads strung together, or with blinds made of fine bamboo reed. Sometimes these bead-curtains would offer a glimpse of the colors behind them; the pedestrians would arch their necks and irreverently stare into them.

One day as I was returning from school, I got totally engrossed in looking at the stone elephants at the entrance of Begum's haveli. Her eldest son Mumtaz came and stood by my side. We studied in the same school, but Mumtaz wasn't allowed to enter our home. He said: "Come inside."

I was dumbfounded; my heart was hammering away inside my chest — I truly believed that if I were to cross the threshold of this house, the elephants would come alive and throw down those plaster pillars placed on their heads. Mumtaz was oblivious of my thoughts, and he repeated: “Come inside, we can play hide and seek, we have many places to hide,” and he caught hold of my hand and took me indoors.

There was a large courtyard in the haveli, in a corner of which stood an enormous *peepal* tree. At the foot of the tree was a small pond cast in stone, with a small tap dripping a slow stream of water into it. There was a terrace beyond the pond and beyond the terrace were two hallways flanked by tall pillars and arches, draped with curtains. There was nothing exceptional about the architecture or the layout of the haveli; it was similar to the rest of the havelis in the vicinity of our house, but I still found it enchanting and strange, as if I had entered a maze. There was a low *takht* placed on the stone terrace, and a buxom, middle-aged woman was sitting on it. I suddenly understood that she was Begum and my heart began to race. I asked Mumtaz timidly: “Who is she?”

Mumtaz smiled and said: “This is my Amma Begum.” Then he raised his voice and called out to his mother: “Look Amma Begum, we have a visitor.”

Begum had been busy reading a book. She raised her eyes and looked at us and I realized that she was a beautiful woman in spite of her age. Her skin was fair and clear, and her hair was curly and thick, her eyelids were heavy and drooped, the flesh on her arms was flabby yet she had an air of grandeur about her. All the while she looked at me, I felt a strange whistling sensation in my ears.

I spoke in a small, frightened voice: “Perhaps I shouldn’t have come here.”

She smiled and asked: “Why?”

“I have always been stopped from coming here,” I stammered in reply. Begum did not say anything. She continued to smile and continued to look at Mumtaz and myself. Then she asked me to come closer to her and asked: “What class are you in?”

“Class six,” I replied. “I am in the same class as Mumtaz, but I am always ahead of him.”

She smiled and pushed a book in front of me: “What is the name of this book?”

“*Divān-e-Hafiz*.” I spelt the name on the slim cardboard cover of the book.

“Well-done, what is written on page one?” She asked.

I took the book from her hands, but the writing swam before my eyes and I said: “Persian is taught from class seven in our school, I will start studying Persian next year.”

She asked Mumtaz to draw closer and she said: “Son, what is written on the first page of this book?”

Mumtaz took the book from her hands and in a single breath read the entire poem and I was astonished because he was considered to be the quietest and slowest student in the class. And he had just read this entire poem with great speed.

I tried to hide my own embarrassment and said: “He has probably learnt this by heart, he does not know Persian because Persian is taught from grade seven in our school.”

Begum ignored me and continued to smile and said to Mumtaz: “My son, why don’t you explain, how we use this book for divination and search for a prophecy in the *Divan-e-Hafiz*.” And Mumtaz rattled off like a parrot: “First you read the *Bismillah*, then you read the *Qul* thrice, then you take Allah’s name and open a page of the *Divān* randomly and place your finger on a verse instinctively; the meaning of that verse is the prophecy.”

Begum continued to smile with a particular expression on her face, and I continued to feel embarrassed. She asked me to come closer and she embraced me in her soft arms. I found that a bit strange, I could smell the faint scent of attar wafting off her kurta, and I thought to myself that my mother and my sisters only applied attar on Eid and special occasions. The fragrance of her attar haunted me long after; the skin on her arms was

cool; it seemed she had just taken a bath. It suddenly occurred to me that if my mother could see me now with Begum, who lived in the haveli of the elephants, who my mother talked about in whispers and whose sons were forbidden from entering our house . . . what difference would it make if she were to see me now? . . . I thought to myself as I disengaged myself from her arms, deciding that I was not going to tell a soul in my house about this meeting.

Begum asked me in her soft and melodious voice: “Are you fond of studying?”

I replied: “Very much.”

“Do you want to learn Persian?”

“But our school...”

She cut me off saying: “What difference does that make? If you are interested, come over with Mumtaz, and I will teach you Persian. By the time you reach grade seven you will have read *Gulistān* and *Bostān* and I will teach you how to make a prophecy from the *Divān*.”

I said with some trepidation: “How can I come here? What if my mother hears about it?”

She replied with a smile: “She is not going to stop you from learning Persian, a person travels to the end of the world to gain knowledge!” There was a hint of mischief in her voice.

I replied: “I will come without telling her.”

I would go across to Begum’s house with Mumtaz almost every day. Each and every room in that haveli was unique, the large hall in the haveli was adorned with overhead fans decorated with cloth frills; frills which were soiled with grime and the dirt flies left behind. Chandeliers were suspended above these fans and during the day the sun would infuse them with all kinds of colors and at night the electric bulbs would enhance their beauty. The walls were adorned with large, ornate, picture frames. The fans, frills, chandeliers and colored pictures created a strange sensation inside me, as if all these things were alive and that they followed me about the haveli with millions of eyes.

Begum would say: “If you want to learn Persian then you must first learn the verbs.’

And I would start reciting the verbs, the genders and plural forms of nouns, present tense, adjectives... and much more, and I would wonder how Mumtaz who was considered slow in class, who the history teacher would ask to stand on his desk the moment he entered the classroom, how could he remember all the conjugations and memorize all the Persian poems and odes. I would curse Mumtaz in my heart and Begum’s dulcet voice would echo in my ears repeating the verbs. Begum cherished a deep love for Persian; she never tired of giving multiple examples of the complexity of the grammar and its usage; her voice never lost its softness and musical quality. Gradually, I began to understand the rules of Persian grammar. The complicated grammatical rules somehow began to unravel, and I began to translate Hafiz and Saadi, sometimes I would bring along books in Urdu or English to give my mind, over-burdened with Persian a rest, and Begum would say: “Don’t read Urdu, this language is a sign of your downfall.”

I would get agitated at her strange logic and snap: “I will certainly read Urdu; certainly, I will.’

She would continue to smile without uttering a word and I would add sourly, quoting the infinitives: “This Persian language of yours is all rubbish, ‘*Chunain* and *Chuna!* *Kani* and *Kuna!* What sort of a language is this? I don’t want to learn it.’

She would reply with a smile: “Then you will remain ignorant” and recite the Persian *Sher-e-Shutur*.

Then, I would mumble: “Why are you abusing me in Persian?”

And she would reply: “I am not cursing you; these are the words of a famous Iranian poet about those who don’t understand Persian.” Silent sobs would well in my heart and a while later I would make my peace with studying Persian and some unseen force would compel me to memorize the grammar and the poems. I felt a strange bond with Mumtaz, and Begum’s sweet smile carried a hint of a challenge as if she were saying: “Fine, don’t read Persian! We shall see!”

One day, Begum asked me to search for a prophecy from the *Divān-e- Hafiz Sheerazi*. I blurted: “I don’t know how to do that!”

Calmly, he explained the procedure. Having understood the method I thought to myself that it was good in a way, all these small daily confusions and complications would be laid to rest, the moment any uncertainty arose, a prophecy would be ready, I repeated the *Qul* silently in my heart thinking that Begum might ask me to prophecy and that is what happened, she said: “Now find a prophecy .”

I asked in bewilderment: “A prophecy? About what?”

She thought for a while and then replied in a distant voice: “For instance, Khan Bahadur Sahib would come today, my heart affirms this, but I have received no news.”

I was agitated. The problem was that I knew Khan Bahadur Sahib , but I didn’t have much information about him. All I knew was that the neighbors said strange things about him with a smile and were wary of becoming close friends with him. From a distance he seemed impressive and good humored — when I had met him for the first time at Begum’s I had seen a certain kind of majesty in his countenance, he was ruddy complexioned, like a pomegranate, his hair which was graying at the temples was soft and curly, he parted his hair in the middle, and his thick mustache was pointed like partridge wings. Sometimes he would arrive in uniform. It was adorned with ribbons and medals. When I saw him for the first time at the haveli I asked Mumtaz secretly: “Who is he?” Mumtaz replied: “Don’t you know him? This is Khan Bahadur Sahib.” Khan Bahadur Sahib had smiled at me: he had been sitting beside Begum as if he had complete ownership of her, and those of us who learnt Persian from her had none. I felt jealous of him. Khan Bahadur Sahib would disappear for months, but when he would suddenly arrive in his horse-carriage, it would be loaded with gifts and goodies. He would bring countless presents for Mumtaz and his brothers, colorful shirts and socks, cricket kits, and I would think that it would have been wonderful if we had had a Khan Bahadur Sahib in our lives. My fondest memories of Begum’s haveli were those when Khan Bahadur Sahib was away. That is why I had reacted sourly when Begum asked me to look for a prophecy, and I had refused: “I won’t look for a prophecy for him.”

Begum was taken aback at my reaction, and she instantly questioned: “Why?”

I had replied sourly: “He won’t come back; he definitely won’t come back.”

Begum gently placed her hand on my mouth and patted my back and said: “Don’t say such things, he will come back, good boy please find a prophecy.”

I replied: “If you believe he is going to come back, then you find a prophecy yourself, I don’t even know how to do it properly.”

She insisted: “I will explain the procedure to you again. Learn it...you are the only good person in this house at this moment, your prophecy will be correct.”

Surprised, I replied: “You are a good person and so is Mumtaz, what is so special about me?”

She replied: “You don’t understand, the reason is that you are young and that makes you good, the rest of them are not good.”

I said: “You are also good, you offer your prayers and recite the Koran, then what is the problem?”

“There is a reason why I am asking you to look for a prophecy,” she said and continued to smile in her particular way.

I couldn’t bear the effect of that smile and focused my attention on the prophecy. I paid attention, and diligently followed Begum’s instructions, then I closed my eyes and opened a page of *Divān-e-Hafiz* and placed my finger on a verse.

I spelt it out to Begum and asked her to translate it, but her face was flushed, and her cheeks were ablaze. She embraced me and the fragrance of *attar* seeped into my mind and body and every vein. She spoke in her silvery voice: “That is fine, you have prophesied, and I will explain later.” The next day Mumtaz told me that Khan Bahadur Sahib had arrived unannounced the previous night, and he had brought him an entire wicket keeper’s kit. I silently cursed Khan Bahadur Sahib: “You, complete fraud,

I made the prophecy, and you brought the wicket keeper's kit for Mumtaz. You, complete fraud...'

Time passed and the locality where Begum lived also changed; slowly but surely everything changed, the ground floor shops on either side of the two-way lane changed, the storekeepers smartened their stores with tiles and full-length mirrors, and instead of the dim glow of lamps in the evenings, dazzling electric bulbs illumined even the stones on the streets. Those old-fashioned latticed balconies disappeared, as well as the beaded curtains and blinds and the silk attires which could be glimpsed, but the haveli continued as it was. The color of the plaster pillars and the elephants supporting them would change now and again, the colour of the great door with large brass nails would also change, but indoors, everything remained the same. The chandeliers in the large halls remained the same and the electric bulbs continued to twinkle, creating rainbow-colored patterns.

With the passage of time Begum also changed a little. She put on a little weight and her hair was streaked with silver, and she now needed glasses to read the *Divn-e-Hafiz* or *Gulistāñ* and *Bostāñ*. Even from behind those glasses her velvety eyes would peer at you saying: "There is a tremendous amount of sweetness in the Persian language, do you remember Hafiz's poem *Nako Kari Kund* and *Tara ri Kund*?" I had memorized many of Hafiz's poems and pages upon pages of *Gulistāñ* and *Bostāñ*. I would get the highest marks in Persian, even more than Mumtaz, and when the results would come out Begum would embrace me with great pride.

Then the War started, and an unseen revolution crept into every aspect of life, the price of wheat went up, cloth disappeared from the market, and young men from practically every home joined the army and were sent off to distant shores. Life became unbearable. Respectable elders belonging to families embroiled in this chaos, shed their centuries-old prejudices. Educated young women gave up the purdah and got jobs in schools and colleges to support their homes. However, there was still a mild resistance as regards the 'Haveli of the Elephants,' and the boys and girls of that haveli were still not welcome in other homes, but they acknowledged each other if they met in a bazaar or a procession, in a cinema hall, or in a restaurant. It seemed that there was a great gulf separating the rest of the residents from those who lived in the haveli. A

gulf almost impossible to overcome. No one knew when, where, or how this gulf originated nor where it ended. Whenever I tried to overcome this gulf, I found myself suspended in a vacuum.

Whenever there was a *milād* or a *majlis* in the neighborhood, the women would unwillingly invite Begum and her daughter Akhtar. Akhtar was Begum's youngest daughter. In spite of her young age there was an air of sadness around her, as if she were possessed by an invisible being; perhaps it was the shadow of Begum's personality. Whoever had seen Begum in her youth commented that Akhtar was a spitting image of her. It seemed as if time had rolled back twenty or twenty-five years, and Akbari Jan from Faridabad with her buxom body and velvety eyes had been reborn. But Akhtar's voice did not have the same dulcet sweetness that Begum's had, instead there was a pathos in it. Whenever I went to the haveli I would feel as if Akhtar was contemplating something deeply and she would absent mindedly keep twisting her dupatta. She hardly ever spoke to me; she would greet me distractedly and fidgeting with her dupatta disappear in some great hall. The neighbors would invite Begum and her daughter to the *milād* and *majlis* because they had melodious voices, and because of them such occasions would become more vibrant. Begum in her powerful, yet sorrowful voice would present the '*bayān*' and the incense sticks would slowly burn down to ashes. The old women covered in black or white dupattas would sob like young girls, and Begum's voice would echo, it would dip and soar and sometimes an old woman would elbow her neighbor and say: "the wretched woman has such deep pathos in her voice, such power!"

Then Akhtar would start reciting a *marsiya* or a *nauha* to commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Hussain and his comrades, in her plaintive, gentle, supple voice. And the young women's attention would be drawn to her, and each one of them would pray for a voice like hers and they would recite along softly. For hours the two of them would hold the gathering spellbound. And when the spell would break a doddering old woman would wipe tears off her wrinkled face and say: "These wretched girls!" and she would glare at all the young girls trying to imitate Akhtar's rendition. In spite of all the meetings at processions and *milād* the gulf remained. Perhaps this gulf was truly deep and ancient. This gulf could not be ignored. Age old prejudices, in spite of the changing status quo nothing could not bridge this gap.

One day, quite suddenly, Akhtar disappeared with a boy from the neighborhood. She left for Bombay and immediately began looking for a job at a gramophone company. Begum stood up to this indignity gracefully, and busied herself looking for prophecies in the *Divān-e-Hafiz*. But the women of the neighborhood had a priceless topic of discussion at hand.

My mother said: “See, it all boils down to blood. Whatever is in your blood, one day comes to pass.”

I got agitated and replied: “Blood does not matter, don’t girls from other homes marry of their own choice?”

My mother did not seem to agree with my logic, and I realized that it was impossible to bridge this gulf. It was better to let things be.

One night we were all sound asleep. There was a deep silence around us, the rooftops and courtyards were crowded with sleeping people. Every time a light breeze blew, the branches of the old trees would rustle, and it would seem as if they were stirring with new signs of life. The crisscrossing lights of the streetlamps would enmesh these branches in their web and a game of hide and seek of light and shadows would begin. Having tossed and turned in the warm night, we had finally fallen asleep when a sudden sound like the buzzing of bees arose in the distance. In my state of drowsiness I felt as if I were living in a nightmare, a giant swarm of poisonous bees was swiftly flying towards me, and it was impossible for me to save myself. When I woke up, I could still hear the distant buzzing, and as the breeze picked up the noise grew closer. When we focused on the noise, we realized they were slogans, people we could not see, were chanting provocative slogans in the dark of night.

Miles away was a group which was chanting provocative slogans. As the noise grew louder it seemed that the people were getting closer and would soon reach us. People who had been woken up by this noise began congregating on rooftops – women, men, and children; lights were being switched on, illuminating worried faces. These people drew closer to the edges of the rooftops, they seemed as if they were in a daze, frightened even as they whispered among themselves. The breeze was stirring the leaves and agitating the birds, the people on rooftops were

speaking in low voices to their neighbors, they were speaking about terrible things.

“I hear that there are thousands of people near the fort.”

“Will they attack the city at three in the morning?”

“What is the time?”

“It’s almost three.”

“Dear God — please let the morning come in peace! When I hear the *azān* I will make an offering in honor of the Great Pir.’

“What difference will an offering make?”

“There has been bloodshed and violence in other cities, the same will be repeated here.”

“Ya Allah, Allah, the Cherisher.”

“Let the day break.”

“Let the day break.” This phrase was infused with hope for everyone. They were consciously and subconsciously waiting for the morning. As if the morning light would carry some magic which would dispel the terror of those chanting voices. But the morning would not come. In the silence of the night some invisible demon had trapped the feet of time. Time had reached a point now, and stood quite still.

“How long is it before daybreak?”

“Why is there no *azān*?”

“I have heard that the area around Jama Masjid has been attacked, who will give the *azān*?”

“Ya Allah, please let the daybreak.”

And then time slowly released itself from the invisible demon’s clutches and the call to prayer was heard in the neighborhood and a pale light started to spread beyond the treetops, and the noise also drowned in

the distance. The next day, rumors thrived in the city, people frightened and disturbed roamed to and fro; they were afraid to venture far from their homes, they could not determine who had instigated the fearful chanting in the night; where had the invisible crowd disappeared? Everyone would ask: “What will happen now?”

These rallying cries could be heard every night, these chants were the prelude to the storm. The dreadful storm clouds had been hovering on the horizon for a while now. The terror-stricken people had their eyes glued to them. Then this storm stirred from the horizon, heaving towards us. Moment by moment it was drawing closer, and all of us felt that this time, the storm clouds would burst, and what would happen when they burst? What would happen to the neighborhood, the settlements, the centuries old boundaries, the women, men, and children. Their minds were already worrying about this storm; their hearts were already filled with dread and suspicion. Everyone would pose this question, but no one was prepared to answer it.

One day someone was murdered on the main road in our neighborhood. At dusk, three men had surrounded a young boy in a narrow lane. With blood curdling cries, the terrified boy had tried to escape but he was stabbed in the back. The police arrived at night and took his body away for an autopsy examination.

The maulana of the neighborhood mosque disappeared one night. When the early morning worshippers arrived at the mosque, they found the door locked – something that had never happened before. On the third day of his disappearance, the maulana’s body was found in a ditch near the fort.

A few days later there was a clash between two groups near the fortress ramparts. First, they came to blows with sticks, and then knives were drawn. Three were killed, six injured. The police arrived and took away the dead; the injured were taken to the hospital.

A hand grenade exploded in a newspaper office.

Two cars were set afire on the main road.

The Pathan guard at the petrol pump was stabbed to death in his sleep.

Innumerable incidents like these came to light in several localities. There was fear and panic everywhere; rumors abounded and then the centuries old prejudices began to break. People abandoned their centuries old ancestral homes and moved to other localities where they could identify like-minded people, where they would form new groups and roam around fearlessly. Every morning you could witness people fleeing by the droves – men carrying their belongings on their heads, women wearing their burqas carrying bundles on their heads and clutching small children, in the crook of their arms, moving swiftly, breathlessly, from one lane to another, from one neighborhood to another, from one locality to another, from one city to another – A caravan with no beginning, an exodus of people with no destination.

Most of the houses in our neighborhood were now deserted. Every night, the chanting voices grew louder and each morning more houses lay empty– abandoned homes, devoid of women’s voices and the sounds of crying children and the rattling of pots and pans. When curfew was imposed the silence became even more oppressive. When it was lifted people would venture out in twos and threes and converse amongst each other in low, frightened voices, new rumors would abound; they would console themselves with lies and return home even more uncertain, even more afraid. The homes which had been abandoned remained thus for a few days, but then one day a mob broke open the locks and smashed the windows, they piled up the belongings on the road outside and set fire to them. When the flames leapt to the sky, the mob was infused with a new life, the chanting grew louder, some of the people would ferret what they needed from the burning pyres, and the pyres continued to burn.

Storm clouds had gathered over our heads, the remaining people in the neighborhood were sending their women and children to other localities. What was strange was that, in spite of being in the eye of the storm, in spite of all this fear and uncertainty, Begum’s haveli remained an island of calm. Whenever I found the time and visited Begum the same smile would dance upon her lips, her eyes held no terror like the eyes of the women around her, like the eyes of my mother and sisters. Even now, she would calmly sit on her *takht* and look for prophecies in the verses of the *Divān-e-Hafiz*, and whisper prayers under her breath, and the peace on her face and her eyes would remain constant.

Mother said: “Begum seems content, she is certain that there will be an admirer in the bloodthirsty mob who will spare her.”

“That is very unfair, maybe her heart is at peace and that is why she remains so calm,” I replied.

“Hunh,” my mother grunted and continued, “when will your heart be at peace?”

I replied agitatedly: “She prays, she recites the Koran and that is why she is at peace.”

Mother was not convinced: “We all do, don’t we, but if there is something to fear then one is afraid.”

Our old cook interjected: “I have heard that her grandmother became a repentant and spent the rest of her life at a shrine. Perhaps the saint of the shrine has his shadow over her.”

Mother was still not convinced.

When the entire neighborhood emptied out, the few remaining people my mother and sisters included, gathered in one place. They agreed that Begum’s haveli seemed the most peaceful and safest and that they should take shelter there. Many of the upper-class women who would shudder crossing Begum’s gate found this advice strange. However, the fear of death loomed large, and those old prejudices did not prove strong enough, and they moved into Begum’s haveli. Begum saw them and exclaimed: “With your coming my unfortunate home will be blessed.” They made themselves at home in Begum’s haveli as if they had a right over it. Begum continued reciting the Koran blowing over them; she continued to read the *Ayat-al Kursi* drawing imaginary circles around them.

A few women had already taken shelter in Begum’s haveli before the others joined her. These were the women from behind the latticed balconies and bead partitions, whose sweat smelt of makeup. When the area was cleaned up, they were removed from their balconies and sent to a remote area and huddled into multi-storied buildings. When even this locality was not spared, some women disappeared, and the rest found shelter with Begum. In spite of living in the same house, surrounded by the same fear, the upper-class women remained aloof from these women, and the ancient gulf separating them remained.

After this, the demonic clouds of the storm hovered over our heads and burst, but Begum's imaginary circles kept the havoc at bay. Whenever there was commotion on the streets and people could be heard chanting at a feverish pitch, the sounds of gunshots mingled with screams, every terrified person in Begum's haveli would believe that the magical circle would break, and the storm would engulf them. But the storm would abate, and the noise would die down and the smell of gunpowder would be carried away by the breeze and everyone would think, "*Begum is a strange woman, God has bestowed her prayers with immense power!*" Then the upper-class women would gather and sit apart in some corner and eye the rest of the women with suspicious eyes – women whose clothes were embellished with tarnished lace and whose faces were ruined with using too much makeup. I would find this interaction amusing at times and at other times disgraceful, I would often feel that it would be better if this storm broke, because it would bring down the invisible, useless barricades and bridge this gulf.

There was a deep silence on the road and an unpleasant smell wafting off it.

A few days ago, the horse carriage stand had been attacked, and in the dark of night many horses had broken their tethers and fled, the sound of their pounding hooves echoing frighteningly off the walls of the stand. These runaway horses had disappeared, one had however crashed into a wall near Begum's haveli, and injured itself, breaking its forelegs. It lay in agony on the street and its blood flowed on the tar road till it died. Its heavy body still lay there, and the smell of the rotting carcass spread far and wide and the people in the haveli inhaled it constantly.

There was complete silence on the road, the streetlamps stood like skeletons with their arms outspread. Things had been calmer in the last two days; curfew was still imposed, but the sound of the horrific chanting had quietened and the sounds of gunfire too, had subsided.

A woman from the other group, who had been squatting, shoved her flabby breast into her baby's mouth and said: "I believe seats are now available on aircrafts to escape this hell."

"Yes, that's what I have heard, but who will listen to us?" returned a woman sitting close to her.

“Why won’t anybody listen to us? Till we have blood in our bodies and there is warmth in our blood, someone is bound to listen to us,” and they smiled knowing smiles. Their smiles seemed alien in this atmosphere of dread — and the rest of the women, my mother included, looked on enviously.

The woman with the baby repeated: “I have heard you can get seats on an aircraft.”

“Yes, we have also heard this, but think of a way out.”

“Yes, you must try with conviction.”

“The world belongs to us if we remain alive. Hiding in this haveli will get us nowhere.”

Begum heard them and drew close to them and advised: “Why are you in a rush, let the riots settle, you will find seats on a plane.”

“Fine, we are in no rush,” the woman with the baby replied sarcastically.

“I have two young lives with me,” said another.

“It will make no difference to you Begum; you have passed your prime. Even Akhtar has found a place for herself. You can remain here or with her, we are worried about our future, if we escape this hell, we can rebuild our lives.’

These women’s barbed remarks left a momentary sadness on Begum’s face, and a bitterness lurked briefly in her smile. The women continued speaking among themselves, ignoring her, and my mother eyed these common women enviously.

They continued whispering all day and by the evening their faces were glowing with contentment, as if they had made up their minds about something, or reached a decision. The restlessness and worry that had been lurking in their eyes had vanished. The next morning the woman with the baby got up and got dressed. She drew a line of kohl in her eyes, she palmed the baby off to her friend and left the haveli when the curfew was lifted. Her friends saw her off, I also walked to the gatehouse, she

turned back and looked at her friends and said: "I am terrified, I have never stepped outdoors during the day." They all laughed vulgarly. The woman's high heels clicked on the road, and she disappeared from our view. She remained away the whole day and her baby whimpered all the while. When she did not return in the evening, the baby began to cry uncontrollably. Curfew had been imposed once again, the last rays of the sun circumambulated the *peepal* tree and disappeared, but she did not come back. Fear and uncertainty gripped her friends; they fell silent, each one of them would pass the baby around, sing to it and pat him to sleep. The baby continued to howl and search for some unknown thing.

The next morning, a loud pounding on the gate, jolted us. The women looked at each other with concern, and Begum answered the door. A truck full of young men was parked outside. The woman was seated among them. Her face was flushed as if she had applied makeup and her clothes were crumpled. She was sitting at the back of the truck and smiling calmly and the men sitting with her were laughing coarsely. These women with their common compartments and plain faces clutched their belongings, grabbed their children, and clambered into the waiting truck. Before they departed Begum drew a protective circle around them at which the women laughed disgustingly. One of them retorted: "Of what use is this now?"

Another piped: "Now the blessings are only in Begum's house, we are leaving, only the unsullied remain behind." They laughed and the truck departed. Begum seemed a little dazed and she closed the door of the gatehouse. And my mother kept gazing at the door longingly.

After the truck had departed, those remaining in the haveli began to look like lost souls. It appeared, they were lacking something; fear and restlessness were no longer visible in their eyes; that had been replaced by an emptiness. It appeared as if they were questioning each other: "What will happen to us? Those women have found a way out." Even Begum seemed quiet and distant; she was surrounded by these respectable women, yet remained apart. I would think that Begum was now alone on the other side of the gulf which had existed from time immemorial. We were well aware that Begum could have departed with the women and boarded the truck and escaped this hell. For some unknown reason she had chosen to remain alone on this side of the gulf. Her particular smile had also become pale in comparison, she seemed preoccupied. The people in the haveli spent the next two days in a daze, but no one was prepared

to speak out. When I woke up on the third day, I saw Begum sitting in the courtyard adorning herself.

The makeup completely changed Begum's personality, the silver streaks in her hair had disappeared, she had perhaps applied hair dye the night before, her wavy dark hair was now embellished with colorful clips, and her cheeks glowed like rosy flower blossoms.

I had seen Begum adorn herself for the first time, and I inadvertently remembered the Parsi girls from forty years ago, who were stars of theatrical companies like Baliwala, and Great Alfred. When Begum finished her makeup, she elegantly stepped in front of the full-length mirror, looked at her reflection and placed a red bindi in the center of her forehead. Her body seemed slender in a tightly draped sari.

Never before had I seen Begum dressed like this. This makeover had transported her into the past. The Begum of twenty years ago was quite undesirable in spite of her being exceedingly attractive. There was something common about her – something I had never been aware of; she no longer seemed like the Begum I had known for such a long time — she had transformed completely. She was the woman whose house I wasn't permitted to enter, for whom Khan Bahadur Sahib arrived laden with gifts, and I understood then that these prejudices which had existed for centuries were in place for a reason. These were not imaginary, preconceived notions— these were real, and it was better if this gulf remained firmly in place.

My mother and the rest of the women were speechless when they saw Begum. They understood at one glance Begum's new stance. They said nothing but continued to look at her with reproof. Whenever Begum felt their disapproving gaze directed at her, she tried to busy herself elsewhere.

When Begum had completed her makeup, she said: "All of you should remain here, I am going out." My mother looked at her with pleading eyes, as if she wanted to say a lot of things but lacked the courage to do so."

There was regret in the eyes of the women and I felt extremely annoyed at their helplessness.

The imploring helplessness in their eyes annoyed me.

In my heart, agitatedly, I said to Begum: “You should have left with the others if you wanted to walk out looking like this.” I knew that Begum would understand the harsh and sarcastic tone of my voice and at that point I didn’t want to conceal it either. For a few moments she continued to look at me, her particular smile on her lips — I turned my face away scornfully — I did not want to see this transformation of the Begum I knew, to the Begum of twenty years ago.

Begum spoke after a brief silence: “You are very silly, you are so much older now, but still incapable of thinking rationally. If I remain here hiding inside, what will happen to all of us? For how long are we going to continue living like prisoners?”

I remained silent; I was still perplexed. My mother and the rest of the women were silent too, and their helplessness was hammering away at me. Begum continued speaking: “We gain nothing by sitting at home, we have no idea for how long the atrocities will continue.”

“But what can you do?” I asked and I could feel tears choking my throat.

She replied: “What can you know? You are still a child. After all, that woman figured things out for herself and the others. I will venture forth now.”

I stood there speechless. There was a hint of defeat in Begum’s voice, but she was trying to smile victoriously, as she moved towards the gatehouse, she looked at my mother and the rest of the women and said: “I don’t want you to worry, I feel this terrible omen lifting, I have drawn the circle around you...If you draw the protective circle then... you remain in Allah’s protection.”

I accompanied her to the gatehouse, and she whispered in her musical voice: “Do you still remember how to look for a prophecy from the *Divān-e-Hafiz*?”

“Yes, I remember,” I replied in a voice choked with tears.

“Wonderful,” she said. “You are a good boy. That day you had found a prophecy for Khan Bahadur Sahib, please have a great prophecy ready for me, I should be back soon. May God be with you.”

I remained silent and worried, as Begum stepped outside. The elephants were still there, silent and eternal, shouldering the heavy pillars. I could hear the sound of Begum’s feet clicking on the road. As the sound gradually faded away, I shut the door and returned indoors.

Begum’s makeup was strewn across her dressing table in the courtyard, in the middle of this mess lay the leather-bound *Divān-e-Hafiz*, with Begum’s name engraved in gold on it. I picked up the *Divān* and flipped through the pages. My mother came and stood beside me, and asked: “Why are you looking at this book?”

I replied: “*Divān -e-Hafiz*? Begum always looks for prophecies in this book.’

My mother smiled — now there was a look of contentment in her smile. She said: “Yes, I have heard that prophecies from *Divān -e-Hafiz* are always accurate and divinely ordained. Come, let us look for a prophecy.”