

These are the thoughts that go through Ayesha's mind in Khamosh Pani on the two fateful days when she is at the well.

On the Other Side of the Water

- 1947 -

I followed my mother and sister, who were following my father. At first, I did not know why or where we were going. I just followed silently, as all girls must do. Soon I realised that we were walking to the village well. When we got there, I saw a crowd had gathered around the well. The men seemed to be congregated towards one side, and were having what looked like a very important discussion. Jassi's father had a determined look on his face, and I could see the creases in his forehead deepen as he delivered his speech. I caught a few stray phrases like '*Isi mein sab ki bhalaai hai...*' and 'It is the only way to protect the women's honour...'

I remember this caused a stir among the elder women and Jassi's mother, Gunpreet *Chachi* got up and said, "I will be the first." My bewilderment augmented, and I looked on curiously as she made her way to where the men were standing by the well. She climbed the wall of the well, then turned around and said, "My sisters – this is the only way. It is better to die than to lose our honour." And without any warning or any signs of hesitation, she turned back around and vacuously jumped into the well. Jassi screamed and ran to the well. There was now an empty space where *Chachi* had been. I stood flabbergasted. In utter horror I looked questioningly towards my mother, who was trying to pacify Jassi with some other women. I realised that that earth-shaking message had just been conveyed to the women of the village, although the significance of this message did not strike me in its full force just yet. I anxiously turned to my sister, Parminder, who calmly responded to my gape with, "These are honour killings, Veero. There is nothing to be

ashamed or scared of. *Desh ka bantwaara ho raba hai aur Charkehi Pakistan ko jayega*. All the Sikhs need to cross the border, but so many women have been abducted and raped, that the elders feel it is better to die at the hands of our fathers and brothers, than that of our enemy.”

It hit me: Partition was inevitable and absolute, not just a possibility. Yet, I could not understand how a man-made border that partitioned a piece of land could define people’s identity. I heard the voices of my mother and relatives declaring all Muslims as ‘our enemy’. But I didn’t understand. Salma *Chachi* had committed no crime for me to brand her as an enemy of mine. “Enemy?” I wanted to ask. Until yesterday, Salma *Chachi* was still Salma *Chachi* and now she was our enemy? Just because she was Muslim? And what honour was there in taking your own life? I would be dead either way – whether Bauji killed me or some Muslim man. So I told Parminder, “I’m not going to jump.” She just looked at me and echoed Gunpreet *Chachi*’s words: “*Ab bas yahi raasta bacha hai Veero, aur koi raasta nahin. Bauji ne keh diya hai...bas yahi raasta hai?*”

I ran to my mother and tried explaining to her how this made no sense whatsoever. If we tried crossing the border, at least there would be some chance for us to live the life that lay ahead of us. This way, we were all dead. I wasn’t going to do it. And nothing she could say would make me change my mind. “Veero,” she said, “we’ve let you do as you liked all through your life. This one thing we’re asking of you is very important; you don’t understand how much worse things could be. This is the only way to attain Heaven.”

I glanced at Amarjyot; we had liked each other for four months now. Just last week he had said that he wanted to marry me. He was leading his six-year-old sister to the well, who was crying unstoppably. “STOP!” I wanted to shout, but of course I couldn’t. Did he too think that this was correct? My life couldn’t end now, just when it was blossoming. Again and again, the fact that this invisible border was dictating the path my life would take was making me angry and scared at the same time.

“No...” I said and started to back away. “Veero!” Bauji said sternly. Amar looked my way when he heard the noise coming from where we were sitting. “No, Bauji, I can’t do this. I don’t want to do this. I want to live life on my own terms.” I looked over at Amar, who immediately averted his eyes. His eyes brimmed with disappointment. The illogical situation frustrated me; I felt wronged and betrayed by the people I loved most. So everyone I cared about wanted me dead - Amma, Bauji, Parminder and now Amar. Where were his “*saath jiyenge, saath marengé*” promises now? “It is we ourselves who can protect our honour and safeguard our dignity,” Amma said. “Yes Amma, I agree. That is exactly why I refuse to jump into the well.” Saying this, I turned around and without a glance back, I ran as fast as I could. I ran until I couldn’t run any more. Bauji and my brother, Jaswant tried calling me back and even followed me for some distance but gave up when Bauji said, “*Use jaane de Jaswant. Agar use hi apni izzat ki parvah nahi, to thik hai. Mere liye woh mar chuki hai.*” That was the last time I saw them, my loved ones. All of whom wanted me dead.

- 1979 -

I had to come here for the first time in over thirty years today. Ashraf’s wife Shabnam had stopped bringing water for me, and after not having any fresh water for three days, I was left with no other choice. I was now ostracized from society – the people I had given up my religion and my family for, now treated me like an outsider - they still viewed me as a Sikh. They showed no recognition or appreciation for the fact that I had been a good Muslim for thirty-two years. All that mattered was that I had been born a Sikh. They were all narrow-minded people blinded in their own faith - faith in an invisible god, yet no faith in the goodness of humanity.

I tried getting water up from the well without looking down into it but it was too challenging a task. Though I tried hard not to, I inevitably caught a glimpse of the still water. A flood of memories inundated my mind, taking me back thirty-two years ago, when all the Sikh women of my

village were brutally massacred by our own men, when I used to be Veero, not Ayesha. Nostalgia washed over me...memories of a past life flashed before me...Bauji...Amar....pain...betrayal... frustration...and I stood – staring at the water, completely entranced, for what seemed like eternity. I remembered Jassi crying after Gurpreet *Chachi* jumped in, I remembered the pride *Chachi* had taken in being the first one. I was still not able to understand that. What heaven were they talking about attaining? What sort of God demanded such sacrifices?

Sacrifices – I remembered Amrit Kaur's sacrifice that she had to make a few weeks before Partition. She and Akbar had fancied each other for months but both of them had been too shy to do anything about it. Even though Rupinder and I had managed to get both of them to finally admit their feelings to each other, I knew it was too good to be true, like most good things have been in my life. The storm broke out on the day they were spotted by Amrit's mother in the *purana kila*. All hell broke loose. Amrit was made to pack her things and leave for Amritsar the very next day. Two weeks later we got the news that she had killed herself. While they were sending her away, she had been crying, and said, "I will die without him Baba. Don't make me do this." But all her father had said was "I would rather kill her myself than hand her over to a Muslim boy." I now realised that he had been absolutely serious – just as Bauji and all the other men in the village had been on that fateful day thirty-two years ago.

Why had Jaswant come back to Charkhi? Who had asked the politicians to open the border after so many years? They had not only opened the border – they had opened wounds that were still raw, wounds that still hurt. I remembered Bauji's harsh words as I had run away from them. What did he want to see me now for? So that he could kill me after not having been able to kill me then? Part of me wanted to go back and prove to him that I had had a good life – Altaf had found me hiding in the fields three days after the incident at the well, and had taken me home with him. He had given me a hiding place and eventually suggested marriage because being a Hindu in Pakistan

was not an option. He did not touch me until we were married. I did not lose my honour. I did not have to lose my life either. Everything was fine until General Zia-ul-Haq had Bhutto *saab* hanged and took over the country.

Why did Salim have to meet those fundamentalists and get swayed by them? Did they not realise that we were all the same people? Just drawing a border between people does not make them different from each other. After Altaf's death, Salim was the only one I lived for. My only child, I had great hopes for him and Zubeidaa, his childhood sweetheart. Since he'd become friends with those city-dwellers though, Zubeidaa and he had stopped getting along. Zubeidaa's desire to go to college and make a name for herself was unacceptable to him. Those 'friends' of his had filled his brain with old-fashioned ideals – the very ideals I had refused to live by thirty-two years ago. Now what was left in my life? Nothing. Just a big empty hole, I realised, as I continued staring into one. The politicians and generals sitting in Lahore and Delhi do not seem to realise how their 'steps-towards-peace' were completely obliterating my hither-to peaceful existence.

Even Ashraf *miya* had turned his back on me. I knew he had told Jaswant that I was still alive because he was the only one who knew, and I thought he understood, but Shabbo had stopped bringing water from the well for me. He even refused to make eye contact with me. After Altaf's death, they were my only family, but even they were swayed by the village politics. It was *déjà vu*; again, the ones I cared about the most had been ripped away from me because of the norms of society. Nothing I had done had benefited me, the more I had tried to fit society's norms, the more I had been hurt.

Maybe it was all fate. Everything was pre-destined. Maybe it was time for the sixteen-year old Veero to finally stop believing that we carve our own destinies. Lines from my favourite story by Premchand came back to me: '*Hum jis baat ka josh se virodh karte hain, ek samay aata hai, hum unbin baton ko chup-chap sweekar lete hain.*' What was I still living for? The only son to whom I had devoted my

entire life considered me a *kaafir* and preferred that I not come in front of him. He was passionately promoting fundamentalism and division within the village – it uncannily reminded me of events thirty-two years ago. Splitting up of villages, breaking of families, riots, massacres – I had been through my share. I didn't know if I could deal with this all once again. And for what? First it was Bauji and Amar who wanted me dead, now it was Salim. Would this cycle ever end? It seemed as though the forces of history can be unforgiving not once, but twice.

I broke out of my thoughts and focussed on the water – the still water. It had seen so much, but never said anything in protest. My life seemed to be a restless torrent of endless change governed by the decisions made by outsiders, who changed the path of my life as and when they pleased. My heart longed for the world to stand still - like the water - so that we could enjoy the pleasures of stillness and forget the hurtfulness of instability. The water was like a mother who welcomed you to her fold no matter what you had done. It was an uncomplaining, silent entity. Who knows what all it had seen? The water reflected me, and I was reflected in the water.

I stared at the calm water, so different from my state of mind. I longed for that state of calm, a peace that comes from knowing that somehow, magically, everything would be alright. And Premchand's words ran through my mind again. And then I knew what I had to do. I couldn't believe it had taken me so long to see it. I would finally have the peace I had been searching so long for. I jumped into the well. The grateful knowledge that the cycle had finally ended was my last coherent thought before the merciful water swallowed me.