

QAISARI BEGAM

Excerpts from *Kitab-e Zindagi**

[TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: Qaiṣarī Bēgam (c. 1888 in Delhi–1976) belonged to a family of distinguished writers. Her maternal grandfather (she calls him “Nānā Abbā” in her memoirs) was the eminent Dip ī Nazīr Aḥmad, author of Urdu's earliest and much celebrated novel-length fictions, such as *Mir'atu'l-Arūs* (Mirror for Brides) and *Taubatu'n-Naṣūḥ* (Repentance of Naṣūḥ) that were written for moral edification but in a remarkably lively conversational style that made them very popular.

Qaiṣarī Bēgam wrote poetry in personal notebooks, and probably kept a journal as well, in the manner of educated Muslim ladies of the time. She put together her memoirs, presumably at the insistence of her daughter, and not in the least with an eye toward publication. Perhaps she was hesitant to come forward as a writer because she was conscious of her family's accomplishments in the field of Urdu literature. However, when one of her relatives, the scholar-writer Shānu'l-Ḥaḡ Ḥaḡqī learned of the manuscript memoir he thought it well worth publishing. It was serialized in *Urdu-Nama*, the journal of the Urdu Dictionary Board, concluding in 1976. Though the serial publication was followed with interest by readers and was admired by writers and critics, the memoirs remained in a fragmented form until recently. They were finally edited and published in book form by Qaiṣarī Bēgam's granddaughter Zahrā Masrūr Aḥmad in 2004 under the title *Kitāb-e Zindagī* (Book of Life).

The memoirs are a delightfully disarming record of her childhood years in Delhi and her later life in Hyderabad: marriages (including her own), births, deaths, celebrations, customs, personal problems, almost everything related to family and household. Written in a refreshing,

* Qaiṣarī Bēgam, *Kitāb-e Zindagī*. Ed. Zahrā Masrūr Aḥmad. (Karachi: Faḡli Sons, 2003).

animated, conversational style, the detailed descriptions are never boring for the reader. Her ingenuity is charming; her record a veritable mine of information. *Kitāb-e Zindagī* is such a comprehensive account that it goes beyond autobiography and becomes a social document at once unique and heartfelt.

The excerpt I have translated describes her marriage and what ensues. Her energetic prose style is so close to speech that translation was both extremely challenging and rewarding. Indeed, she could have been the fiery-spirited heroine of one of her grandfather's novels!]

My Marriage

AFTER DESCRIBING the marriages in my family I am going to talk about my own marriage. I was never robust and often had to be on *hakīmī* medication for various ailments. I was thin and frail, almost sickly. My mother used to say that when I grew old I would simply not have the strength to get out of bed. I didn't look at all like girls in the bloom of youth do; on the contrary I was delicate and weak. Since I appeared to be much younger than my age, there was no rush to get me married. Secondly, my parents were waiting for my brothers to return from England; their return would fill our hearts with joy and the marriage celebrations would be really enhanced by their presence. Innumerable letters were written urging them to come soon, telling them how forlorn we were without them, how hard it was for us to enjoy any festivities and that my marriage could not be finalized in their absence. But for how much longer could my marriage be postponed? My brothers kept making and breaking promises and delaying their return. When my in-laws began to insist on setting a date and my dear departed Dīnī Ammā Šāḥiba, who was my cousin [my paternal aunt's daughter] as well as my future mother-in-law, began saying special prayers (*jalālī vaẓīfa*) to expedite the marriage, my parents, who were worried about her deteriorating health anyway, unanimously decided to settle on a date. They said that the lady had had precious little joy in her life and was wilting in sorrow after the death of her daughter, so perhaps the arrival of a daughter-in-law would lighten her grief and be like rain to the parched earth. The fact is that my time had come. My par-

ents had always been sympathetic and considerate towards my cousin. The day and date for my wedding was finalized and preparations began.

[...] While the wedding preparations were in full swing my heart was sinking and I was sad instead of happy. I had always kept to myself, so now as ever my lips were sealed but a storm raged in my heart. I couldn't stop thinking and worrying. I was far too emotional. Lucky are those who are not. Anyway, I was in a bad state because of my sensitive nature. I remembered my childhood; all the comforts of home, the servants, the gifts I had received. I wasn't used to any kind of discomfort. I can't have such comforts at my in-laws place (*susrāl*), I thought. Everything will change after marriage: my parents will leave for Hyderabad and this house will be empty because I will have to live in my *susrāl*. I won't like it there at all. There's only my poor grief-stricken mother-in-law who is ill and unhappy; no sisters-in-law, no one of my age. As for the person I'm getting married to, when I have no interest in him why would he be interested in me? He's never spoken to me. I respect him as an elder. Why am I being hung around his neck? Sometimes I would recall how in anger he had hit poor Rāḥat Afzā. He must have a temper. If he gets angry with me what will I do? Who will I go to? I happened to be at their place the day he got angry with his mother and left the house. She didn't utter a word of remonstrance; and when he did not come back at the end of the day her motherly feelings got the better of her. How upset and worried she became: What if he has drowned himself in a well? May God protect him from doing anything rash. I have never seen such displays of anger in my house. How will we get along, what will happen, what shall I do? I couldn't sleep. I was restless all day. Miserable, depressed and anxious, I kept to my room with my anxieties all bottled up. One day I had the occasion to visit my friends at Khaṛī Bā'ōlī. My two friends, Ṣāhira Bēgam and Nūrjāhān Bēgam, were as old as I was. They asked me why I was so quiet and said that I should be happy because I was getting married. My maternal uncle Asad Ḥusain, who was a poet, asked the three of us to compose a *she'r* individually. I don't know what they wrote but I composed the following lines:

Friends, don't ask what I am going through

You have no idea how I go on living
 When my wedding drew near my heart became
 full of sorrow
 Few experience what I am going through

My friends asked me again if I was happy with the match or not and I said I wasn't. Three days later when my mother went to Khaḥī Bā'ōlī her aunt narrated the story to her. My mother became apprehensive; really it was something to be perturbed about. When she got back she wrote me a wonderful, lengthy letter offering advice (*naṣīḥat nāma*). Her letter was so elegant I was amazed by its eloquence and have no words adequate enough to praise the purity of its contents. After all she was Nazīr Aḥmad's¹ beloved daughter. The advice offered in the letter was so excellent and so well phrased that a reader's anxiety and apprehensions would be allayed. She had given me all kinds of assurances. I would read this letter over and over and marvel at my mother's writing. I wish I still had the letter. My mother had said very clearly that if I were unhappy with the proposal, she would break off the engagement at once. I wished that my mother didn't know any of this, I wished that I could have kept quiet and sacrificed myself for her happiness without a murmur. My dearest mother, she is a thousand times wiser than I am and knows what is good for me. I am leaving one mother and going to another. My new mother has been through so much. God has taken away her only daughter and she wants to give *me* that place in her heart. So I put myself in God's hands. I would accept what fate had in store for me. I prepared myself to live for the happiness of others.

I think what people call "marriage" is, in reality, a tremendous upheaval (inqilāb). For a person who has had all the comforts, who loves her environment, and for whom the mere thought of the days to come is frightening or menacing, apprehension and anxiety are natural. I felt this upheaval would snuff out my breath, choke me. I wanted to put my arms around each and all and, crying, appeal to them not to take away my freedom. Eventually the wedding, like all weddings was upon us. All the supplies required for the occasion were made ready first. The house was

¹Ḍīp ī Nazīr Aḥmad (1836–1912) was a pioneering Urdu novelist who wrote, among others, *Taubatu'n-Naṣūḥ*, *Mir'ātu'l-'Arūs*, and *Ibnu'l-Vaqt*.

whitewashed; the cornices were lined with golden paper, carpets were laid on the floor and out of town guests began to arrive.

[...] When all arrangements were complete, the day for the *mānjhā* ceremony dawned. Bḥābhī Ṣāḥiba, may God bless her, took me to the room upstairs. Poor, helpless me, I went with her with a heavy heart. Hot water for my bath was ready. She helped me bathe and dressed me in saffron yellow; everything I wore, *gharāra*, kurta and dupatta, were in that color. She made me take off my bangles; my ears and neck also were now bare of ornaments and I was brought downstairs. I crept into my room like a thief. Head bowed I sat down lost in thoughts of my impending future, my bundle of anxieties lying open before me. Guests for the ceremony began to arrive; the *ḍōmnīs* who are hired to sing on occasions like this one, came too. A red curtain on which silver edging had been sewn was hung on my door. Who knew that my heart was bleeding too? Why was everybody crowding in? Was this a show? It was the same old me. How was I changed all of a sudden, become something precious? I began to get angry. My friends started fooling around, teasing me, tickling me; the *ḍōmnīs* began singing: There was excitement in the air. The first song of the ceremony talks of an auspicious everlasting occasion, but isn't this in God's hands? It's in His power to make or not make a marriage auspicious (*mubāarak*) and peaceful (*salāmat*). This wasn't an ordinary marriage after all. Our two families were very close to one another, my father's older brother, my chacha abba Maulvī Anvāru'l-Ḥaq Ḥaqqī Haqqī's family and ours. Thus the bridegroom's and the bride's families were as intertwined as ghee and khichri. The harmony and love were unique, there was no ill will, no jealousy; everyone's hearts were brimming with warmth.

By sunset the house was packed with guests. A chauki was laid out in the central courtyard. From the tons of *ub an* that had been prepared, a generous measure was taken out into a huge copper dish and soaked to form a paste. After that a silver foil was stuck on it. The halwais had made tons of *pinḍīs* for the occasion. Seven of those were wrapped in silver foil and arranged on a *daurī*. Āpā [older sister] was a naturally gifted organizer. She had made excellent arrangements. A gold embroidered cloth was spread over the chauki. Everyone found places around the chauki.

The *mīrāṣans* began singing songs appropriate for the ceremony. A special tray was brought out with paan wrapped in silver and gold leaf. This was deposited on the chauki. Then someone carried me to the chauki and I was made to sit there like one sits on a chair, with my legs on the floor. I bent myself twofold, or rather threefold, and sat. Everyone was gathered around me smiling; their voices were high-pitched and strong with happiness. It was a house where a wedding would take place, so there was brilliant festivity. My father, my male cousins and some other close relatives were invited to come join in the ceremonies. My father was asked to give me one of the *pindīs* and say that he had done his duty by me. My father couldn't bring himself to say this; his daughters were his life and soul. Someone grabbed my elbows and my arms were pulled forward with my palms cupped as in prayer. Abba's eyes were brimming with tears, I don't remember if he placed the *pindīs* in my cupped palms or asked someone else to do it for him. He put a piece of *pindī* in my mouth and slipped away. Now everyone else performed this ceremony. Each one took turns to feed me a bit of *pindī*, scoop the *ubṭan* with a silver rupee and rub it on my hands. My ears got stuffed with *ubṭan*. At last, people washed their hands and faces and became human again. I couldn't eat a thing but I pretended to eat by taking the food to my lips and then slipping it into the handkerchief that one has in one's lap. My tears wouldn't stop, my heart was full, and if I could have I would have jumped from the chauki and disappeared. Finally, when all had had their turn, I was carried inside and then the game of playing with *ubṭan* began in earnest. Soon the clean white sheet (*čāndnī*) that was spread on the floor, the faces, hair, clothes, everything was covered with the yellow stuff, and the whole house was filled with its fragrance. In this ceremony, everybody gives a silver rupee to the bride to be. Oh! I forgot to mention that I was decked with jewelry made of flowers. Such fragrance! I forgot to talk about that. The *ubṭan* game with its frenzy went on till late in the evening, but after that dinner was served. My friends hung around me, amusing me with their banter. The singing outside my room went on late into the night. My mother-in-law, may God bless her at every moment, was there along with the other guests.

All the guests participated in the bridegroom's *mānjhā* ceremony as well. Between two and five hundred *pindīs*, *ubṭan*, unguents for a bath,

silver rupees for milk for the bridegroom—which had been scrubbed to make them shine and which had been arranged on a decorative, covered platter (*khāṣḍān*)—flower jewelry, and paans folded and wrapped in gold and silver foil were all arranged on huge copper trays covered with satiny cloth and placed on the heads of women from the barber and leather worker castes and sent along with our guests. The bridegroom delighted and pleased everybody with his witty talk.

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Bashfulness of Brides

Dīnī Ammā, that is my mother-in-law, lavished as much attention on me as she could. She bought me a new lamp and a clock, and always had fine food cooked for me. There was always a great variety of snacks for afternoon tea. My routine was to rise very early and go to her room to greet her. She would shower me with blessings and ask me to sit by her side. If I was at my in-laws' and my mother had visitors, my mother would send for me; and if I was at my mother's and there were guests at my in-laws', I was sent for. In Delhi, people expected and appreciated brides for being demure and bashful. Those who didn't observe proper modesty were criticized. I was used to seeing this kind of behavior from childhood and I had heard people endorse it. My sister-in-law was always very demure and I had often heard people praising her for her bashfulness. She was admired for eating miniscule quantities of fruit at breakfast. In fact, she even nibbled *fālsas*. Everybody was pleased with her, and none disliked her. For ages, when in company, she kept her eyes closed. My younger brothers would often lie in her path, expecting her to open her eyes and look when she walked, so that they could catch a glimpse of her eyes this way and tease her. When Āpā Sa'īda Bēgam talked about her *susrāl* she would tell us how her husband had watched her for months, lest she falter in demureness or money matters or in visiting etiquette, but she never gave him a chance to fault her for any of those things and won his respect at all times. So if I wasn't modest, and rejected the family tradition, I would be a target of criticism everywhere. My mother-in-law was a lady of the old times. I had never seen my husband in Western clothes before marriage, nor had I even seen him smoke a cigarette. I knew nothing

about his temperament so I wouldn't even guess at his manners and characteristics. Above all, I had an extremely shy and unassuming nature. I wasn't talkative or vivacious, so, as a person who was shy of everybody at home, how could I, newly married, open up with a husband six or seven years older than me?

I remember that once Dīnī Ammā sent the afternoon tea to our room and my husband came in to join me. He asked me to eat and began to offer me each one of the refreshments. Without thinking, I would bashfully pick up very small morsels. This upset him greatly. I had a tiny *kbirni* in my hand when he struck out, slapped the *kbirni* away from my hand and stormed out leaving the tea and snacks right where they were. I was so distraught that I have no words to describe my state. I was absolutely blameless. How was I to know that my husband disliked shyness? I was so overcome by this incident that I began crying uncontrollably. A sea of thoughts began to ebb and flow and I was reminded of the angry outburst I had witnessed before we were married. I thought that if he could be so angry with me, a new bride after all, then God help me in the future! I didn't know what beliefs he had and what kind of temperament he possessed.

I was crying and thinking about these things when Āpā Muẓaffar Jahān came in. Seeing me in tears she immediately figured out that my husband who had just left the room was displeased. She gently asked me what had happened. But I couldn't speak a word and cried even more. Āpā left my room and went to tell her mother, who became very unhappy. She came and consoled and reassured me, calling her son a good-for-nothing and blaming him for losing his temper for no reason. She told me that the demon leaves him quickly and that I shouldn't take it to heart. But my temperament is such that even a small thing hurts me and I'm not able to get over it quickly. Dīnī Ammā was a little anxious about my husband's ill temper, so when I was going upstairs to sleep she asked Āpā Sa'īda to go upstairs and sleep on the other side of the terrace, just in case the demon hadn't left him yet and he might still be angry. But his anger had evaporated. At night he talked to me and his voice carried downstairs, but no one could make out what he was saying. My dear Dīnī Ammā thought that he was shouting at me and that Āpā Sa'īda had fallen asleep, so she kept anxiously pacing in the courtyard. She even threw

pebbles to wake Āpā up. But Āpā was awake, and when the pebbles fell on her she thought it was thieves trying to find out if the household was asleep or not. Next morning, when Āpā Saʿīda and I came downstairs, she began to complain and said, “Baṛī Āpā, what a place you assigned me for sleeping! Thieves kept me awake all night. Whenever I was about to fall asleep a pebble would land on me. I was fearful that thieves would jump in any minute.” My mother-in-law laughed and said, “Saʿīda, it wasn’t thieves. It was me throwing pebbles to wake you up because I could hear Antū [my husband] talking so loudly.” Āpā Saʿīda said, “*Aay hai*, Baṛī Āpā, God bless you, what a blunder! It made my blood freeze.” Everybody laughed. Oh what a muddle it was!

I had been married for a few days when I accompanied my mother to Kḥaṛī Bāʾōlī. Someone came there and told us that my mother-in-law had a fever, so my mother thought it appropriate to send me back to be with her. I was sent off and my mother called that evening to see her as well. When my mother was leaving after the *maghrib* prayer, I went to see her off where her dooli was parked, but as soon as her dooli moved away I was overcome with emotion and came back crying. A bedstead was there in the courtyard. I slumped on it and wept inconsolably at being separated from my mother. Āpā Saʿīda saw me and asked if something was wrong, why was I lying so quiet? Her kind concern touched my heart and made me cry even more. Eventually she informed my mother-in-law. The poor thing, despite the fever, came to comfort me, called for the hakim and sent for medicines to calm my nerves. A servant was dispatched to call my mother who was still en route; she came back at once. My tears had caused so much anxiety for all. Later I felt a lot of remorse for having caused so much anxiety over such a little thing. All that had happened was that my mother had gone and I was left behind, that I was separated from my mother. □

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—Translated by Mebr Afshan Farooqi

Glossary

daurī: platter made of palm leaves.

dooli [dōlī]: a small, portable, enclosed cot, used by women to travel short distances.

dōmnī: a woman singer or dancer belonging to the caste of Indian Muslims who converted from the Hindu *dōm* (scavenger) caste; the males of this caste mostly play musical instruments for a living.

fālsa: a small berry like fruit with a sharp tart taste and purple in color.

gharāra: baggy, loose trousers worn by women.

khāṣḍān: a betel dish or box with cover.

khīrnī: sticky yellow gum-fruit.

mānjhā: a feast given by the bride and bridegroom's family prior to the wedding.

mīrāṣan: a woman singer belonging to the hereditary caste of musicians; sings only in front of other women.

pinḍī: a kind of ball-shaped sweet made of flour mixed with several kinds of nuts, almonds, raisins, etc.

ubṭan: a paste made of chickpea flour, turmeric, oil, and rose essence rubbed on the body to clean and soften the skin.