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'Amma!' Sita screamed.

'She was just a girl.' Her mother spoke softly,
her voice thick and strange.

Orphaned as a child and widowed at thirteen, Sita has always known the shame of being born female in Indian society. Her life constrained and shaped by the men around her, she could not be more different from her daughter, Amita, a headstrong university professor determined to live life on her own terms. While trying to unravel the mysteries in her mother's past, Amita encounters a traumatic event that leads her down the path of self-discovery.

Unfolding simultaneously, their stories are set against the dramatic sweep of India's anti-colonial struggle in the 1940s. The narrative moves between present and past, from modern-day Singapore to pre-war rural India, and to the chaotic Burmese battlefront where Sita experiences life as a recruit in the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, the women's unit of the Indian National Army. Richly layered and beautifully evocative, the novel is a compelling exploration of two women's struggle to assert themselves in male-dominated societies of both the past and the present.

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MEIRA CHAND

SACRED WATERS

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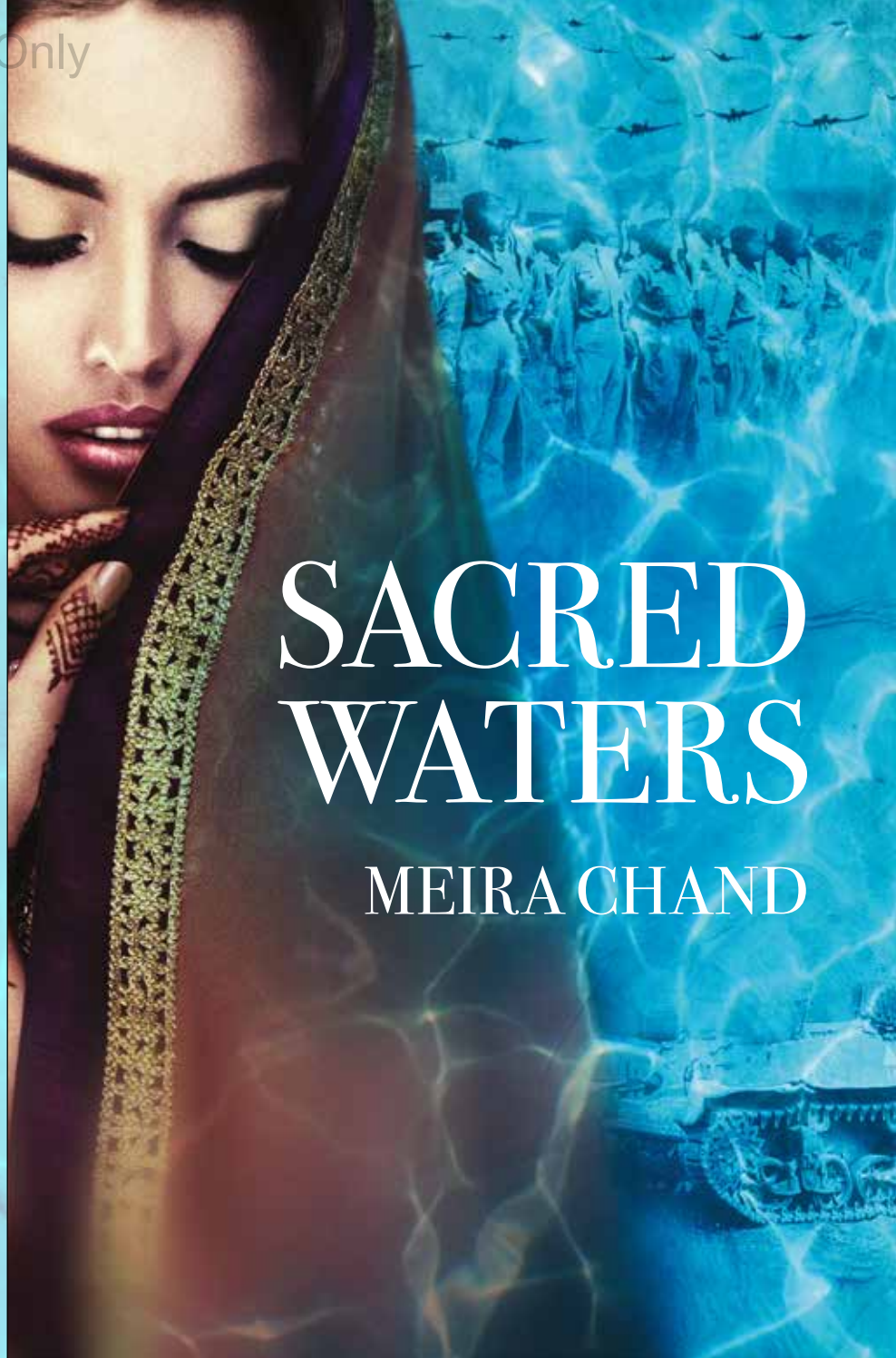

SACRED WATERS

MEIRA CHAND

Praise for Meira Chand's novel, *A Different Sky*

"Chand proves herself a master of the modern Asian epic in this tale…she endows her characters with humanity and complexity, …grounding…their histories in solid research, and she offers a credible, compelling panorama of the tragedy and resilience, culture and individuality, political evolution, dissolution, and renaissance of 20th-century Singapore."

Publishers Weekly

"…a panoramic page-turner…This meticulously researched book is alive with engrossing detail, whether on the odour of Chinatown, the privations of a guerilla camp or the appalling rituals of foot binding."

The Guardian

"Historical fiction at its most complex and engaging…balances the communist groupings, Japanese occupation and emerging nationalism with skill… As history, *A Different Sky* is engrossing; as fiction, highly enjoyable."

Literary Review

"…the protagonists are richly and deeply drawn, the sights, sounds, and smells of Singapore are gorgeously rendered, and the principal characters' interwoven stories combine to form a compelling narrative."

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Prologue

Some memories have the power to shape a life forever. Dim as shadows behind a curtain, shifting and uncertain, they are all the more menacing for that. When later in her life she remembered that day Sita was unsure of the details, she was only certain of the outcome. She still recalled the muddy skin of the water reflecting the sky above, hiding the darkness below.

She had been five or maybe six years old. She remembered walking with her mother beside the river, gathering wild herbs to make a poultice for grandmother's aching knee. That day, as she ran about the riverbank, her mother stopped and began to groan, low at first and then louder. Stumbling into the long grass they usually avoided because of snakes, she squatted down, partly hidden by the scrub, pulling up her sari as all the women did when answering the call of nature out in the fields. As her mother's cries grew intense, Sita ran forward. The vegetation screened but did not completely obscure a view of her mother, who was now moaning and panting like an animal. As Sita watched, she reached down and lifted up a bloodied mass from between her legs. Sita shrank back in shock; her mother's insides appeared to be pushing out unstoppably from her body.

'Amma!' Sita shouted, distress leaping through her.

Then, something moved and twisted and began to scream, and she saw that her mother held in her hands a creature with life and voice. Pulling a handful of soft leaves from a nearby bush, her mother wiped the child and, lifting the small curved knife she carried at her waist when they collected herbs, cut the cord that tied the baby to her. Eventually, holding the child in the crook of her arm, her mother stood up and walked towards the river.

'Where are you going?' Sita yelled, filled by new confusion.

'I must wash her clean,' her mother replied.

Wading knee deep into the water, she lowered the child into the soft lapping swell, holding her there, caressing her tenderly all the while with her one free hand. For a moment Sita saw the child in her mother's arms and the next she was gone, the tide lifting her free. Sita watched her float away, held briefly upon the rippling surface of the river before she sank slowly from sight, eyes open, a startled expression on her small face, uttering no cry of protest.

'Amma!' Sita screamed.

Her mother continued to stand in the water, her back towards Sita, unmoving. At last she turned, and Sita remembered her body, slack and flat beneath the old sari, emptied of its burden. She turned to look up at the sky and the sinking sun, and Sita saw the anguish in her face.

'Amma!'

She called out again, unable to understand what was happening. Then her mother was beside her, taking her hand, pulling her homewards.

'She was just a girl.' Her mother spoke softly, her voice thick and strange.

'The current is strong, it lifted her from my arms,' her mother explained in a more normal tone as they began the walk back to the village.

Sita stared at the river, awash with the light of the sky, the soft lap of waves cuffing the bank. The murky water had closed over her sister as if she had never been. It was a swift flowing river with a treacherous current, used by those too poor to properly cremate their dead. The fish in the river were large and plump from an excess of pickings on half-burned bodies.

'The *devi* will protect her,' her mother whispered.

In the house, they kept a picture of the goddess Durga, riding upon a tiger. Sita liked this picture, as much for the tawny tiger as the radiant goddess. The creature's amber eyes held her own, as if something special passed between them. Although Sita's heart beat fast from all she had just witnessed, it was comforting to think the goddess and her tiger protected her sister.

Releasing Sita's hand, her mother walked ahead, not once looking back at the river. In the distance the sky cracked open upon the dying sun, gold and crimson and purple. Near the village, the silhouette of a dead tree, struck by lightning long before, stood against the burning sky like a gnarled hand pushing up from the earth. Sita paused for a moment before the image, seeing it anew, then hurried after her mother.

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Singapore, 2000

There was the click of the door as Parvati left, and then the rap of her heels fading away outside the apartment. Soon the whirr of a descending lift was heard, carrying her down to where she had parked her car in the forecourt of the building. Amita turned to her mother, no longer able to control her irritation.

'Why won't you talk to her?'

She bent to wipe away a biscuit crumb clinging to Sita's mouth, aware of the unnecessary roughness with which she did this. As always, her mother's behaviour was unfathomable. Even the usually patient Parvati had given a sigh, packing away her notepad and checking her watch in a way that made it clear she thought the visit had been a waste of precious time.

The late afternoon sun streamed into the room and fell cruelly upon Sita's dark hair, illuminating a bed of white roots. Amita noted resignedly that soon she would have to help her mother cover this new growth, painting thick dye onto the brittle strands of hair, wrapping plastic sheets around them both, taking care to cover the floor with newspaper. Already, at the thought of these procedures her impatience grew. It seemed bizarre that, in her late seventies, her mother kept her hair

resolutely black, while Amita in her early fifties rejected such artifice and welcomed the streaks of grey.

'You should let your hair stay white,' Amita reprimanded, still full of resentment.

Shifting her weight in an aged rattan chair, aware of Amita's tight-lipped frustration, Sita stared out of the window of her daughter's Clementi apartment, twelve storeys up from the ground, and wished she were a bird. She would not let her hair go white. It was nothing to do with revealing her age, as Amita thought. She could not tell her daughter that the colour white must be resisted in every way, no white blouse — no white nightdress, *no white hair*. She remembered the day she had made that vow.

Staring silently out of the window at the banks of trees and tall apartment blocks, Sita continued to ignore her daughter's agitation and imagined the elation a bird must feel, soaring free above the earth. Far across the town and beyond the nearby university where Amita taught, were the red-roofed shophouses and narrow lanes of Little India. Buried amongst them was the home she had lived in all her adult life and to which she could no longer return. Several months ago Sita had had a bad fall and, resisting all argument, Amita arrived to briskly pack up her mother's few possessions and move her into the Clementi flat.

'You can no longer look after yourself properly, or climb safely up and down those stairs,' Amita had announced, pointing to the twisting metal staircase that rose from the courtyard to Sita's front door.

A sudden low grinding announced the ancient clock on the wall was preparing to strike, and Amita allowed it four afternoon chimes before she trusted herself to speak again. Her mother had brought the clock with her from her old home when she moved in with her. Now, its crotchety clangs once again measured out her life as they had through her childhood. She hated the thing. As the last rusty reverberation died away she turned to her mother, hands on hips, annoyance rising within her.

'If you will not talk to Parvati, then you and all those other women in that army of yours will be forgotten. Is that what you want?' Amita reached to gather up dirty teacups from the table.

The cane chair creaked as Sita shifted her weight apprehensively. Parvati was writing a book about the Indian National Army in which Sita had been a recruit during the war. She had never spoken much to anyone about her time in the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, but now because of Parvati's book she was being questioned about things she had been careful to keep to herself. Memories rose up within her, painful as the hot dry earth beneath her bare feet when, as a child in India, she had walked to the village well.

Long ago, on the riverbank near that village home, Sita had seen a clam pried open and the soft flesh of its body scraped clean of the shell. That was how she felt about Parvati and the interviews. Soon, she would be forced apart, and bit-by-bit, memories would be extracted from her. Soon she feared she would be like those people whose minds were wiped clean by dementia, who no longer knew who they were. Her memories were a bundle of kindling she carried within her, to light for

warmth whenever the need arose; she had no wish to share them with a stranger, disturbing the many things that lay comfortably buried. Once a memory was voiced it would no longer belong only to her. It had become a battle to keep things back.

In spite of her reluctance to be interviewed, Amita noted the trouble Sita had taken for Parvati's visit, wearing a sari instead of the usual slacks, putting on a pair of small gold earrings. She envied her mother her elegance and, when she could admit it, the much lighter complexion of her skin. When Amita was younger and people remarked on the dissimilarity between them, she took comfort in the fact that she had inherited the darker genes of the father she had never known. With an exasperated clatter, she piled the last teacup onto the tray. Her mother's stubbornness defeated her. Other women who had been part of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment were only too happy to talk about their experiences, many even called it the best time of their lives. Her mother, as always, had to be different, had to be difficult. When Parvati first told Amita about her proposed book, and heard that Sita had been a recruit in the Indian National Army, she could not contain her excitement.

'Your *mother* was a Rani in the Jhansi Regiment? That's incredible! History has neglected the INA women, just because they were women.'

During the Occupation, the Japanese military had formed a special force, the Indian National Army, from Indian POWs taken from the British Army. It was intended these men would spearhead an eventual Japanese invasion of India. Later, the legendary Indian freedom fighter, Subhas Chandra Bose,

arrived in Singapore to take command of the INA, and formed a women's regiment.

'Any women of the regiment still alive are now getting really old. I *must* speak to your mother,' Parvati insisted.

Amita could still hear Parvati's words in her head as she picked up the tray and stalked off to the kitchen.

Sita continued to stare silently out of the window, as if unaware of her daughter's disappointment. Holding her face up to the sun she closed her eyes, feeling the warmth seeping through her bones. How the sun had burned them on the retreat from Burma, and in the jungle leeches had clung to their limbs! She remembered again the constant hunger, the fear of crocodiles as they forded a river. To speak about those long ago things was no problem for her; it was the fear of unwrapping experience that held her back. Layer by layer she would be forced to divest herself of memory, digging down through time to exhume each detail, and eventually they would reach the thing she had so carefully buried, the one thing she wished no one to know. If she began that unravelling, there would be no way to stop until she reached the end, and then her daughter would know the truth.

Soon, she heard Amita returning with a fresh pot of tea, her tread light but determined. Glancing up, Sita observed Amita's single-minded expression, and knew her ordeal was not yet over. Her daughter was as intellectually strong as any man, Sita thought, and she could not suppress her pride at Amita's fierce independence.

'It won't make any difference to the world if no one hears your story. But your life and everything you did will then be as

nothing. Is that what you want?' Amita deposited a cup of fresh tea and a plate of her mother's favourite jam-centred biscuits on the table.

Sita shrank from the impatience in her daughter's voice, agitatedly smoothing the folds of her sari over her knee. Nothing. Her life had been shaped by that word. You are *nothing*, her mother-in-law had told her. We are *nothing*, Billi had insisted as they begged for alms in the street. You women are *nothing*, the Japanese had laughed. You were *nothing* until I married you, Shiva had told her. Anger rolled through her as it always did when these thoughts took hold of her. *Nothing*. The word remained alive within her when everything else was forgotten. Sita was suddenly aware that her daughter was waiting for a reply to her query.

The sun was now hidden behind banks of cloud. In the distance, the sea darkened beneath a sky suddenly leaden with approaching rain. Across that black water was the country from which she had journeyed, and to which she would now never return.

'Maybe you will learn things you don't want to know.' Sita heard the rogue words escaping her and was surprised. Amita paused, cup in hand.

'Talk to Parvati,' she urged, kinder now she felt a weakening in her mother, placing a hand on Sita's shoulder.

'Your life is my history, it's part of me. I have a right to know.' Amita's voice was soft with persuasion.

In the mirror above a worn sideboard Sita caught a glimpse of herself, an old woman, bent and cadaverous, her face

unrecognisable even to herself, the skin drawn tightly over bones it should pad, loose where once it was tight. Her eyes moved to the thickset, middle-aged woman who stood by her side, remembering the baby she had once cradled and nursed. The colour of Amita's coarse grey hair, cut bluntly to swing about the base of her neck, contrasted strikingly against the deeper shade of her skin. Beauty was not a word ever wasted on Amita, but her strong square face with its darkly candid eyes was arresting. Energy sparked through her, lighting her up when her mood was good, drawing people to her. She had never married, and Sita found no reason to encourage matrimony when she looked back over her own experiences. It was better if a woman could be more like a man, self sufficient, one-in-herself, relying on no one, and able to look after an old mother, just as a son would have done.

'Soon I will be dead,' Sita admitted, seeing in a flash of clarity all the damage she might have done Amita by her persistent silence.

Old age was already upon her, but for decades she had lived a lie, and pulled Amita along behind her. The girl had a right to know the truth, whatever the consequences. She looked down at her hands, twisting a ring on her finger. The breath trembled through her as she tried to speak, and Amita bent low to catch her words.

'Tell Parvati to come again tomorrow,' Sita whispered, a sense of relief filling her as she spoke.

The next day Sita noticed Amita's pleasure when she made an effort to smile at Parvati on her arrival. In an attempt to

set Sita at ease, Parvati waived her use of a digital recorder. She was some years younger than Amita, and her colleague in the Department of English Language and Literature at the National University of Singapore. Until recently Amita had thought of Parvati in the same way she regarded everyone in the department, with professional camaraderie. Then, a newly initiated course in Gender Studies required them to work closely together, deepening their association. They learned more about each other's families, confided minor personal details, and sought each other's advice on various topics.

Of dark-skinned Tamil ancestry, Parvati's forbears had arrived in Malaya from Tamil Nadu generations before as indentured labourers on the many rubber plantations in the country. That past was now long forgotten for her community, and Parvati was a respected academic. A slight woman of quick movement and bird-like intensity, she waited patiently across the table, notepad open and pen poised, ready to deposit Sita's words on the page.

Sita stared at her unflinchingly. The woman's thick curly hair was drawn tightly back into a pink band on her neck, from where it sprang free in a bushy tail. Her short cotton dress rose high on her thighs when she sat down, baring bony knees. What criteria determined which memories were of use for her book and which were not, Sita wondered. Sometimes she spoke at length and Parvati wrote nothing, and sometimes she said but a few words and the woman lowered her head and scribbled away at length. Whatever it was she wrote, Sita knew what Amita said was true, a mother's life was a daughter's history. She searched

for the right place to begin.

'You never know when you do something for the last time,' she said, trying to put words to the recollections welling up within her now. A last glimpse of someone, the last closing of a door, a last word spoken; there was always the expectation that the moment would reappear, conversations continue, doors reopen, the festering emotions of a quarrel reignite or subside. Unable to frame these thoughts in words, she kept to the facts of that last day with Shiva, before they left separately for Burma and the war.

'It was raining,' she remembered. 'I wore a sari to please him, although by then I was so used to my army uniform, to wearing shorts or trousers. In the regiment, we all liked the freedom trousers gave us. In those clothes, we walked like men.' Sita gave a slight smile, moving her shoulders in an imitation of masculine swagger, remembering the pleasure of striding about.

Immediately, Parvati began to write and Amita leaned forward, her lips parted expectantly. Her spectacles, as always, slid down her nose and she quickly pushed them back up. Sita paused, her gaze returning to the window, seeing in her mind her old home in Norris Road, behind the nearby Ramakrishna Mission, with its ornate roof of domed pavilions. A spiral staircase twisted up to her front door, and a plant in a rusty oil drum stood beside it. If she had her way she would be living there still, in the room she had shared with Shiva, where she had brought up her child. Now, settled in her daughter's house, Sita knew at last that the past was a distant place, insubstantial and shifting as her memories, and felt bereft.

'I was quarrelling with him when we parted. I'm sorry now for that,' Sita confessed.

'It was war, you knew he might die,' Amita was unable to suppress the condemning edge in her voice. Instinctively, at any mention of her father she always found herself taking his side, although she had no memory of him.

'Even when death is all around, you never think it will come for you. We were given a day off to be together before each of us left separately for Burma.' Images spiralled up before Sita as she spoke.

'I wore a sari, not my uniform. I wanted to please him,' she repeated, anxious that these young women should think well of her.

Instead, she saw the slight rise of Amita's eyebrows, and knew she had made a mistake. Today's young women had different attitudes from those imbued into her. At times she noticed Parvati and Amita exchanging a conspiring glance, as if humouring her eccentricity, and controlled her resentment. What did they know of her life?

Yet it was not her mother Amita was thinking about as she raised an eyebrow, but her father. Why did her mother stress she had worn a sari to please her husband? In spite of his education, was her father's view of women a traditional one? Had he encouraged his wife to join the army or had he been against it? Was their marriage an arranged one, or did they marry for love? If he had lived, would he have urged Amita to marry? She had only one old creased photograph of her father. Shiva stood in the shade of a tree behind his pupils at the Ramakrishna

Mission School, a tall man with a narrow, intelligent face and a shock of thick black hair. To Amita's regret little more could be seen of him behind his pupils, and no other pictures had survived. He had been a teacher, an educated man, and she was sure he would have been proud of her position at the university, proud that she earned enough to look after her mother.

'Then we both left for Burma, for different destinations, by different routes, different trains,' Sita added hurriedly, not wanting the painful burden of memory thrusting up within her now.

The mirror reflected the back of Parvati's head. Sita observed the knobbly line of the woman's spine beneath the floral dress, the smooth curve of her buttocks and thighs, the bare protruding knees. The woman was at ease with her body, as was Amita, in spite of her weight. They did not know the shame associated with exposing their limbs in the way Sita had felt that first day in the Bras Basah camp. They did not know the shame she had felt at being a woman, or the far place from where she had journeyed.

You have changed…you were nothing when I married you… she heard Shiva's words again, and her bitterness deepened. All the old injustices hardened, pushing her down into the dark space that seemed ordained for her, from where she had struggled free. She could not assemble words as Amita did, using them like a sword to cut through attack or confusion. She wanted to tell these young women — because I have changed, you too could change, because I did what I did, you now do what you do. She did not know how to explain this, but she knew it was true.

And she knew too that at last she must put words to her story, if not for Amita, then for herself. To speak would be to experience again her experiences, to weigh them anew in her mind.

Before her on the table was a stack of old photographs she had found the previous night, in a box unopened for decades. She fanned them out on the table before her now, until she found the one she wanted.

'That's me there. It was the day Netaji came to meet us.' She stubbed a finger on the old black and white print, first pointing out herself, and then Subhas Chandra Bose.

'And that is Muni. She was my friend.' Her finger moved to the image of the slight woman standing beside her. As Sita stared at the image of Muni with her thin face and burning eyes, a sense of loss overwhelmed her. She returned her gaze hurriedly to the figure of Subhas Chandra Bose, whom they always called Netaji, Great Leader. He stood with his back to the photographer, surveying the girls lined up on a field before him in their uniforms of khaki shirts and jodhpurs, narrow caps set at a jaunty angle upon their heads, shoulders pulled back, heads held high. Sita's hand rested on the butt of the rifle at her side. Netaji's high polished boots and portly frame were instantly recognisable, and even now Sita remembered the glint of his spectacles, the smoothness of his voice, the faint scent of sandalwood soap as he stepped forward to speak to them. In the foreground of the photo, wearing dark glasses and the stripes of her rank, Captain Lakshmi saluted smartly.

Sita pushed another photo over the table to Parvati, who looked down at it with interest. In the picture a group of Ranis,

guns held out before them, crawled forward stealthily on their stomachs, practicing the art of ambush. The scent of the hot dry earth and the crushed grass that stained their uniforms, came back again to Sita as she stared at the photo. She remembered the heat of the sun on her back, searing through her cotton shirt.

'We were practising guerrilla warfare. Wild lemongrass grew in the camp in Burma. We crushed it and rubbed the juice all over us to keep off mosquitoes. There were so many mosquitoes there.'

The scent of lemongrass had pervaded everything. The past rose up before her as she closed her eyes; smells and sensations she thought long forgotten she found her body had held onto, and released to her now.

'Shut your eyes. Think back. What comes into your mind?' Amita leaned towards her mother, her tone encouraging.

As Parvati picked up the photographs, examining them intently, Sita turned to the window to stare again across the urban sprawl of the town with its high-rise buildings interlocked with banks of lush green vegetation, to the distant view of the sea. Across the Black Water lay India, and somewhere in that endless continent was buried the village from where she had come, the hot dry earth cracked by the sun, hardened and sharp beneath her feet as pieces of broken ceramic, the water dry in the well in summer, the air plagued with the fever that took her parents one by one as they waited in vain for the monsoon, scanning the sky for clouds each day. A short distance beyond the village was the wide Yamuna River, immune to their every sorrow, touching them all in both life and death.

She saw again in her mind the dark water of the Yamuna, sombre as stone. The distant bank was far away, another country, with figures no taller than her thumb. The river pulsed with suppressed energy that came from deep within it, always moving, its thick scent filling her nostrils, expanding in her head. Upon its banks rested numerous small temples where ash-smeared holy men meditated above the fast flowing water, the religious minded bathed below, seeking blessings or redemption. On the stone *ghats* of temples cremations took place, the smoke of funeral pyres billowing up, the cooled ashes of the dead fed to the river. Women gossiped as they laundered clothes, fishermen hauled in nets of thrashing mercurial bounty, turtles rested in the cool mud of the shore while egrets stalked the shallows for fish. To all things, the river gave life and nurture. The goddess Yami, who lived in the river, was the sister of Yama, God of Death. Bathing in these sacred waters, grandmother said, freed a person from the torments of death. Sita remembered how she and her brother, Dev, had sat by the river after their parents died.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Meira Chand is of Indian-Swiss parentage and was born and educated in London. She has lived for many years in Japan, and also in India. In 1997 she moved to Singapore, and is now a citizen of the country. Her multi-cultural heritage is reflected in her novels.

Also by Meira Chand:

A Different Sky
A Far Horizon
A Choice of Evils
House of the Sun
The Painted Cage
The Bonsai Tree
Last Quadrant
The Gossamer Fly