

MEIRA
CHAND

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House of the Sun



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"In March Saturn is coming into the House of the Sun. Saturn is strong and will bring trouble," Bhai Sahib warns Mrs Hathiramani, reading her horoscope in his temple, set within his home in the Bombay apartment building they call Sadhbela.

Forty years before, the residents of Sadhbela were Hindu refugees from Sind, fleeing the turmoil of Partition. Now, in Bombay, these Sindhi exiles live as one family, for better or for worse. With the priest's announcement, their lives will be irreversibly swept along by planetary influence.

Sham Pumnani, the embezzler and sole breadwinner in his family, finds his future suddenly bright with promise. His sister, Lakshmi, meets with the most tragic of fates for women in a traditional society. Rani Murjani learns to stand up for herself and reach out to a new age. Through it all Mr Hathiramani races against time to produce his translation of medieval Sindhi poetry, so that in Sadhbela their proud heritage will not be lost forever.

Skilfully balancing biting humour with a deep emotional undercurrent, *House of the Sun* is a portrait of the follies and foibles of an unforgettable cast of characters, painted with wit, compassion and a lot of heart.

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For Vikram and Anjali
and in fond memory of Kiki

Bhai Sahib examined Mrs Hathiramani's horoscope. He sat cross-legged on the stone floor in a once-white vest and dhoti. The vest had a hole, and a remnant of his lunch, eaten hurriedly at the sound of Mrs Hathiramani's arrival in his temple, had left a deep yellow stain upon it.

Mrs Hathiramani had arrived out of breath after the climb downstairs from her home on the fourth floor, two stories above Bhai Sahib in the building they called Sadhbela.

'O, Bhai Sahib. Anybody there?' she called out loudly. In her hands she held a plate of cashew nut sweets, covered by a yellow checked cloth.

Behind the faded curtain dividing his living quarters from the front room of his home that was set aside for use as a temple, Bhai Sahib stopped eating. His wife frowned and rested a spoon in a pan of dal before continuing to serve her husband. She gave him a meaningful look. Neither replied to Mrs Hathiramani's loud summons.

'Do as you wish, then. I know you are there. I am waiting,' Mrs Hathiramani threatened. Her voice was gruff and masculine. She removed the cloth from the

For Review only

plate of sweets and put it on the altar under a picture of Guru Nanak, beatific and serene. Then she lowered herself awkwardly onto the floor, placed the red, cotton-bound horoscope book before her and stared grimly at the curtained doorway, beneath which she could see Bhai Sahib's bare, sandalled feet, and the legs of a table and chair.

Bhai Sahib returned with a sigh to his lunch. Soon Mrs Hathiramani heard him hawk and rinse out his mouth. Eventually, he appeared from behind the curtain, wiping his nose on a small blue towel. He was a corpulent man with protruding eyes, cheeks of grey stubble, and a coarse moustache.

'I was eating,' he announced, folding the towel over a shoulder. Mrs Hathiramani gave him a well-rounded look.

'Only dal and rice every day,' Bhai Sahib informed her and sucked his teeth.

'I too can eat only dal and rice and not complain,' said Mrs Hathiramani in reference to past bad times and her fortitude through them.

'Nowadays, even for God, people will not pay,' Bhai Sahib grumbled. Mrs Hathiramani ignored the remark.

Bhai Sahib squatted down before her, picked up the horoscope and sighed. In the open window a crow alighted, folded its wings and strutted about the window sill. Bhai Sahib belched and settled to his work. Outside the sun was high, white and hot upon Bombay, carrying the stench of drying sardines from the beach into the room.

Very little of the room was now left for the temple, Mrs Hathiramani noticed with disapproval. When Bhai Sahib had been younger, his family smaller and his faith less easily compromised, the room had been unadulterated by worldly objects. Now, a grown family of married sons, a widowed mother and the constant arrival of new grandchildren pressed hard behind the curtain, and had finally spilt beyond it. The altar, upon which rested the sacred book, was bulky as a four-poster bed, draped and cushioned and garlanded, but the space where Mrs Hathiramani and Bhai Sahib sat, once bare and serene, was now hemmed in by walls of tall metal cupboards in a depressing faecal colour full of family belongings. Upon them were stacked boxes and suitcases and plump bedding rolls, jars of pickles and tins of oil. Some shelves of medicines and a water jar occupied a corner beside a long bench. Space had recently been made before the altar for a large, imported television upon a black metal stand.

Once, coming down a few weeks ago in the evening to see Bhai Sahib, Mrs Hathiramani had been unable to enter the temple for the crush of Bhai Sahib's family before the lighted screen. And Bhai Sahib himself suggested she return later, his eyes riveted upon the television. Mrs Hathiramani had vowed she would never return at all.

Now, Bhai Sahib examined the close lines of faded blue script, written down long before at the time of Mrs Hathiramani's birth, and the symmetrical designs in the worn booklet. At a page with a drawing of a sun surrounded by lotus petals, he paused. The sun, besides long rays emanating from it, had a human face with large

For Review only

sober eyes and a heavy moustache. Within each of the lotus petals was more blue script which Bhai Sahib read with a serious expression.

‘What is it?’ Mrs Hathiramani asked, leaning forward. She was alarmed, not so much at what might be written in the horoscope, but at the change in Bhai Sahib’s expression. She sensed already it would be difficult to dilute the course of whatever destiny was in store for her.

Bhai Sahib shook his head, squinting at the booklet. ‘The Sun is now Lord of the Tenth House and occupies the Ninth. In March Saturn is coming into the House of the Sun. Saturn is strong and will bring trouble. Be careful, otherwise he will do you harm.’ Bhai Sahib looked sternly at Mrs Hathiramani over ancient spectacles, as if she had deliberately arranged this beleaguered state in her affairs.

‘Aiee,’ Mrs Hathiramani moaned softly. ‘How long will he stay in the House of the Sun?’ She pulled the end of her sari tighter about her ample breasts. She was a soft-fleshed, mountainous woman with a small, beaked nose, and small, hooded eyes.

‘He will not move out until June. Three months he will be in the House of the Sun,’ Bhai Sahib announced. Standing up, he spat a mouthful of betelnut juice out of the window. The crow rose with a squawk, but as Bhai Sahib sat down again settled back on the window sill, a mean look in its eye, its gaze upon the cashew nut sweets.

‘What shall I do?’ Mrs Hathiramani implored, hands to her cheeks. The upper half of her face was narrow, as if all the flesh had suddenly slipped to her jaw.

‘The only thing Saturn fears is a sapphire. Wear a sapphire; then nothing can harm you,’ Bhai Sahib replied and suppressed a yawn. The air in the room was unmoving, he stood up to turn on the ceiling fan. From the window the crow croaked in an insolent manner.

Mrs Hathiramani nodded at Bhai Sahib’s advice, and held down her sari against the sudden gale sweeping the room. She looked up at the creaking, speeding fan apprehensively.

‘I will buy a sapphire,’ Mrs Hathiramani decided hurriedly. ‘I will buy one right now from Mr Bhagwandas. He will be home for lunch.’ She paused, then asked, ‘A cheap one will do?’

‘The quality is not mattering, only the stone is mattering. It must be a sapphire,’ Bhai Sahib replied. ‘I will also perform some rites, so that no real harm can come to you,’ he added, averting his eyes.

‘How much will that cost?’ Mrs Hathiramani demanded. ‘You have only just finished those prayers for Mr Hathiramani’s health, and that was costing too much. Mr Hathiramani has no belief in these things; he was angry. He is an educated man and you know the harm education does a man in these matters. How much?’ Mrs Hathiramani’s small eyes grew bright. There was the sudden shrill sound of children in the corridor outside as she spoke.

Mrs Hathiramani got to her feet, levering her bulk up in stages. As she approached the door Bhai Sahib’s three grandchildren burst noisily through, dancing about upon bare feet. One collided with Mrs Hathiramani, knocking the horoscope book from her hand.

For Review only

‘Even your grandchildren you cannot control. You are only charging money and doing nothing,’ Mrs Hathiramani shouted in sudden angry frustration at Saturn. As she bent with difficulty to retrieve the horoscope, her sari slipped from her shoulder, and her flesh spilt forward.

Bhai Sahib yelled at his grandchildren and flicked out at them viciously with the blue towel. They jumped about, laughing louder before finally retreating. As Bhai Sahib slammed the door upon them the crow dived in, snatched up a sweet and flew off to a mango tree. Mrs Hathiramani, out of breath from levering herself up and down, gave Bhai Sahib a look of disgust. She rearranged her sari and opened, then banged the door behind her.

The corridor, like all the passages in Sadhbela, was narrow and dark; the breadth of Mrs Hathiramani’s hips almost filled the space. Some light filtered through from the lift shaft and Mrs Hathiramani lumbered towards it. She shook the ancient bars of the grille vigorously; the bell never worked. The metal clattered and Mrs Hathiramani called loudly down the shaft, ‘O, Liftman. Lift.’

But no lift appeared. The liftman was chatting with a sweeper and refused to hear. By pushing her face up to the bars and squinting down the long dark shaft, she could just discern, far below in a pool of sun, a hairy leg and a portion of his khaki shorts as he lounged against the open door. She would see to him later, she thought, he would not get away with such insolence. She had already been forced to walk downstairs to Bhai Sahib; he had been unavailable then as well.

Mrs Hathiramani gathered her sari clear of her ankles, and began to climb the stairs to Bhagwandas the jeweller, who lived on the floor above Bhai Sahib. An odour of garlic sank into the sour stairway, stained with the red spittle of betel nuts and the filthy discharges of lazy servants, who used the stairway sometimes as a urinal. Mrs Hathiramani reached a landing and there met the mad beggarwoman who inhabited the corridors of Sadhbela. She was haggling with a vegetable vendor for a cabbage leaf to cook, jumping dementedly at the wide basket of produce he balanced on his head.

When the beggarwoman saw Mrs Hathiramani she turned upon her and began to pull at her sari. Mrs Hathiramani, who would normally have flung her away, thought now of Saturn before the House of the Sun. She dug down the front of her sari blouse and produced a warm rupee note that she thrust at the beggarwoman. A donation of such proportion had not been known before from Mrs Hathiramani – the beggarwoman drew back in amazement and forgot to appear quite mad. Mrs Hathiramani pushed past her and climbed heavily on her way, arriving at last upon the third floor.

As she pressed the Bhagwandas’ doorbell she heard the faint sound of Mrs Murjani’s cuckoo clock float down from the seventh floor. It cuckooed twice to mark the hour. Mrs Bhagwandas opened her door, and stood a moment listening to the cuckoo clock with Mrs Hathiramani before inviting her in. As they looked up at the flaking ceiling, wishing their gaze could penetrate Mrs Murjani’s elegant lounge, a dull grating sound swelled up

For Review only

from below and the lighted cage of the lift came into view, rising slowly. Mrs Hathiramani turned to see through the bars the smug grin of the liftman, Gopal.

‘Rascal,’ she shouted. ‘You are not paid to gossip with sweepers. I’ll see to you, you wait.’ She raised a fist, then caught sight of Mr Murjani in the rear of the lift, on his way home for lunch.

‘He is only wasting the building co-operative’s money,’ she informed Mr Murjani as he rose up before her.

Mr Murjani cleared his throat, touched his moustache and said a word of greeting. His face came level with Mrs Hathiramani and travelled on. His polished shoes and Gopal’s bare, hairy legs, sturdy as mahogany, were suddenly before her. Then there was the empty, silent darkness of the lift shaft again, all illumination gone.

‘When we fled Sind, Murli Murjani was still a child,’ Mrs Hathiramani remembered, marching angrily into Mrs Bhagwandas’ living room. ‘On a refugee train from Karachi after Partition, he sat upon Mr Hathiramani’s lap and wet himself as he slept. Mr Hathiramani had only the trousers he wore when we ran from our home before the knives of those Muslims. Not until we reached Delhi did Mr Hathiramani get more trousers at a charity camp. Two months he carried upon him the stain of Murli’s pee. And now, just see, he is such a big man he cannot speak with us. See how money changes people.’

‘But in Sind the Murjanis had money. They were great landowners,’ Mrs Bhagwandas reminded her, apprehensive as always of contradicting Mrs Hathiramani.

‘I’m not talking about our Sind.’ Mrs Hathiramani frowned. ‘Rich or poor, we left everything there at the time of Partition. I’m talking about money Murli has made in Bombay. This money is new money, the other was old. Both have a different effect.’

‘In Sind we were happy,’ Mrs Bhagwandas sighed.

‘There we lived a pure life.’ Mrs Hathiramani pursed her lips, looking out of the window at Bombay. For a moment they sat, side by side upon a black Rexine couch, silenced by thoughts of the past.

In Sind, Mrs Hathiramani had not known Mrs Bhagwandas, who came from Sukkur, a short distance from her own home in Rohri, but she had heard of the family by the same flow of gossip that had made her own people known to many. Almost all the residents of Sadhbela were from Rohri or Sukkur, towns either side of a bridge across the Indus river. All had been Hindu refugees at the time of Partition, all had fled from Sind. Their land lay to the north-west of what was once India, and is now Pakistan. The people of Sukkur had been known to show their superior wealth extravagantly, riding about in ostentatious horse drawn carriages. The people of Rohri had made do with rickshaws and thrift, but swore to their purer hearts and resident saints, their hospitality and their food. In those far-off days before they all became refugees, fleeing from a Muslim Sind, each town disdained the other. History, chaos, poverty and death soon changed such parochial ways.

Mrs Hathiramani sat silently in Mrs Bhagwandas’ bare, spacious room, with its stone floors, and hard-

backed chairs pushed up against the walls in the manner of a waiting room. In spite of a substantial accumulation of money from the trading of gems, Mr and Mrs Bhagwandas were not ambitious. The diamond solitaires that pierced his wife's nose and ears were of such superior quality and size that Mr Bhagwandas' status as a man of means was never threatened in Sadhbela; only Mrs Murjani owned diamonds to equal them. Mr and Mrs Bhagwandas had never got used to all the unnecessary things the owning of money seemed to require. It was too much of a bother to keep up with their wealth, and the life it demanded was too far from the cool, cracked floors, string beds, whitewashed walls and bushes of jasmine they had known in Sind.

Early on, Mr Bhagwandas had secured a sea-facing flat in Sadhbela, on a corner of the third floor. His knowledge of gems had served him well in both Sukkur and Bombay. Throughout the business of fleeing and refugeeing, there had been no dearth of clients in camps or upon trains, anxious to part with their jewels in the hope of restarting life, or continuing its meagre flow. It seemed as if all the women of Sind had fled their homes with their jewellery knotted into handkerchiefs and hidden beneath their saris. Many such bundles had been unknotted in desperation before Mr Bhagwandas, on his journey southwards from Sind. In Bombay he had established himself in the jewellery market, Zaveri Bazaar, and prospered through the years.

'He is still sleeping after his lunch,' Mrs Bhagwandas said of her husband. 'But soon he will come.' Vanishing

into her kitchen she soon reappeared with a servant, who offered a drink of lemonade and some cashew nuts upon a greasy plate.

Mrs Hathiramani began to speak about Saturn in the House of the Sun. Mrs Bhagwandas listened, her head to one side, nodding in concern. She was a loose-fleshed woman, with flowing, grey hair tied back in a rubber band. Her teeth protruded in a good-natured smile to rest upon her lower lip. She offered some cashew nuts to Mrs Hathiramani, and then a plate of cheese crackers she had ordered the servant to bring out. Mrs Hathiramani surveyed the two plates critically. In her own home she offered at least three or four plates of edibles to guests, and always something sweet, not just salty things – it did not show enough respect. Mrs Bhagwandas played up too much the matter of simple living.

Mr Bhagwandas appeared suddenly in the room, smiling and rubbing his hands together. 'What can I do for you, sister?' he asked. He was a stout, smooth-faced man with narrow, liquid eyes creased in a permanent smile, and hair that was dyed an immaculate ebony.

'Bhai Sahib is indeed correct. A sapphire can overcome the evil of Saturn,' Mr Bhagwandas confirmed when Mrs Hathiramani had finished explaining. 'Leave it to me. I will find the right one.'

Unlocking a metal cupboard, he threw open the doors to reveal shelves of boxes and leather pouches. Sitting down at a table with a small suede bag, he fitted his jeweller's glass to his eye, spilled out a pile of translucent stones, and poked about amongst them with a pair of tweezers.

For Review only

'Any cheap quality will do,' Mrs Hathiramani assured him as casually as she could.

Mr Bhagwandas chuckled. The glass protruded like a growth from his eye as he picked up a small stone with the tweezers.

'This will be the correct one for its job,' he decided. Mrs Hathiramani heaved a sigh of relief as Mr Bhagwandas wrapped the gem up in crisp, magenta tissue paper.

Mrs Hathiramani pushed the small packet down the front of her sari blouse into her cleavage, where it rested on top of some rupee notes already deposited there.

* * *

She had to ring her own door bell on the fourth floor several times before the servant boy, Raju, appeared, rubbing sleep from his eyes. Usually the door stood wide open.

'Donkey,' she shouted. 'How long must I ring? Why was the door shut? What were you doing?' She knew he had been sleeping, as was permitted after his lunch.

'Memsahib, I was sleeping,' Raju yawned and scratched an armpit. He wore dirty drawstring shorts and a ragged vest of indeterminate colour.

'Sleeping?' Mrs Hathiramani lumbered up the hallway to her living room. 'Where is Sahib?'

'Sleeping, Memsahib,' Raju replied.

'Sleeping? Sleeping?' Mrs Hathiramani exploded. 'Why are people only sleeping in this house?'

'Memsahib, at this time of afternoon, we are always

sleeping,' Raju reasoned and slipped quickly behind Mrs Hathiramani as she raised an arm in a menacing manner. Mrs Hathiramani began to feel suddenly weak before the tribulations of audacious planets, servants and liftmen.

'Tea, get me tea,' she demanded.

'I have not slept yet,' Raju reminded her, standing back a safe distance. He was twelve years old and had no fear of Mrs Hathiramani. He was quicker in mind and body than she, and there were other jobs to be had in the building.

'Donkey,' Mrs Hathiramani roared. 'Tomorrow I will throw you out. Like a rotten onion from the window, I will throw you out. Tea.' She turned towards the bedroom where she knew she would find her husband.

At the foot of the bed she looked down at Mr Hathiramani's slumbering form. His grey hair was greasily askew, and the bridge of his large nose carried a permanent groove from the weight of his spectacles. These were now folded upon a side table on top of a magazine. Mrs Hathiramani sat down heavily at the end of the bed, unwinding part of her sari. She stretched and yawned; she too was used to a nap after her lunch. Spreading herself across the width of the bed at right angles to her husband's feet, she closed her eyes.

'Memsahib, tea.' Raju rattled the china on the tray.

'Tea? Who is asking for tea?' Mrs Hathiramani sat up. 'It is only three o'clock. This is the time for sleep. Get away.' She closed her eyes again.

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For Review only

As soon as he saw his wife was asleep, Mr Hathiramani opened his eyes, and reached for his spectacles and the *Illustrated Weekly of India*. The arrival of his wife had interrupted his reading of an article about a scandal of high-class prostitution in Bombay. He had put down the magazine not for fear she would disapprove of his reading matter, for Mrs Hathiramani could neither read nor write and so had no way of checking on him. He had feigned sleep so that he need have nothing to do with his wife for a further hour of the day; there would be more than enough of her after tea. He had already heard from Raju about Saturn in the House of the Sun. Raju had heard it from the liftman, who had heard it from Bhai Sahib's servant, who had heard it first-hand, as he washed up after Bhai Sahib's lunch behind the curtain in the temple.

His wife was a disappointment to Mr Hathiramani, both for her lack of education and her inability to bear children. He had known about the education before he married her. He had protested his need for a literate wife, but because of the dowry promised, his pleas went unheard by elders during arrangements for the marriage. At that time an undeniable ripeness had enfolded his wife, in anticipation of which Mr Hathiramani, on the one occasion he had been allowed a glimpse of her, had finally agreed to the wedding. But both his anticipation and Mrs Hathiramani's voluptuousness bloomed and faded quickly, like a delicate flower, but without the expected fruit. They waited, but there were no children.

Mr Hathiramani sent his wife to all manner of doctors, without success. In the end he considered sending her back

to her mother in revenge. Soon the old lady arrived on their doorstep, bringing things to a head. Mrs Hathiramani had sat on a tin truck, which was covered by a pink and white checked cloth and contained most of their belongings, and sobbed. Mr Hathiramani strode up and down, yelling about the mistake of educated men marrying uneducated women, and the fate of the Hathiramani family line without an heir. During this outburst his mother-in-law did an unusual thing; she kept quiet. Mr Hathiramani wondered about this even as he strode about. When he stopped yelling and his wife ceased sobbing, and all three sat in silence, the mother-in-law spoke at last, a crafty light in her eye.

'If that is what you want, we will take her back. But what shall we tell everyone? How will we face them when they know her husband was impotent? What will everyone say?' Mr Hathiramani had opened and shut his mouth, his wife looked at her mother in admiration, and the old lady stared demurely at her feet.

Soon after this event, they had been forced by Partition to flee their home in Rohri, making their way as refugees, stage by stage south to Bombay. In Bombay money was needed and Mr Hathiramani had no choice but to abandon the intellectual life he had led until then as a journalist, and to establish Hathiramani Electricals, a dark, greasy but successful electrical repair shop on Grant Road. They moved into Sadhbela, a crumbling building filled with fellow refugees from Sindh, and settled themselves into its few rooms with several tin trunks, and an armada of jars in which Mrs Hathiramani stored everything from

For Review only

chutney to biscuits, mothballs, buttons and thread. Mr Hathiramani had made his presence in the building felt and he was soon the co-operative committee's secretary.

Mr Hathiramani considered himself above the superstitions of his uneducated wife. The three mechanics he employed in Hathiramani Electricals worked with such unusual diligence that Mr Hathiramani was able to spend much of his day at home. He lay upon his bed in his vest and wide-legged pyjamas, reading newspapers, magazines and a worn copy of *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, of which he had memorised much. A recently acquired *Encyclopaedia Britannica* of the year 1948 was piled beside his bed. Mr Hathiramani had taken several days off from work to read to the end of CER. But many pages were missing, or obliterated by graffiti, and his faith in the project was shaken. He returned to the newspapers stacked about the room, filling the air with their musty smell. He enjoyed diving into piles to extract news of forgotten years, contemplating the progress of things. Mr Hathiramani also put aside a part of each day for the writing of his diary.

Mr Hathiramani did not choose to spend his day stretched upon his bed for comfort, but because it was the most strategic spot in his home. The bedroom faced a short corridor to the front door, which was usually left open to reveal the lift shaft and the stairs beyond. In this way it was possible for Mr Hathiramani, from his bed, to keep an eye on all the comings and goings in the tenement. Those ascending or descending in the lift were viewed and timed by Mr Hathiramani, and anything of importance was

noted in his diary. What he could not see below the fourth floor or during his absences was reported to him by the liftman, Gopal. For this service he paid Gopal a monthly wage. Mr Hathiramani's diligence was appreciated in the building. It had prevented some thefts or determined the culprits, and had once decided Mr Bhagwandas not to give his daughter in marriage to Bhai Sahib's son. By tracing the boy's movements through the pages of the diary, it was clear to Mr Hathiramani and Mr Bhagwandas that he was not of reliable character.

It was as if he had two businesses: Hathiramani Electricals, a lowbrow, bread-and-butter affair, and his diary, a true vocation. In Sind he had run for a time his own literary publication with a group of friends, but after Partition, in Bombay, his opinions seemed unwanted and a frost settled upon his life. Necessity had dictated the establishing of Hathiramani Electricals, but Mr Hathiramani considered he had betrayed himself and had suffered from depression and outbursts of temper until, moving into Sadhbela, he had begun his diary.

Mr Hathiramani used a large, blue ledger for his diary. Each double page was divided. The left-hand page had three columns: two narrow ones headed Arrivals and Departures, and a wider one for Comments. The right-hand page was divided into Miscellaneous Past, and Miscellaneous Present. Its writings had little to do with the life of Sadhbela but consisted, in Miscellaneous Present, of Mr Hathiramani's thoughts upon life and copied fragments from the newspapers he read upon his bed for a large part of each day. In Miscellaneous Past,

For Review only

he compiled from mildewing books of Sindhi script his own English translations of the history and culture of his distant homeland, which had flowered in the Indus valley two thousand years before the Aryans invaded India with their primitive ways. In 300 B.C., the great city of Mohenjo Daro already stood on the banks of the Indus, or Sindhu, river. There were references to Sind in the Greek histories of Herodotus, Hecateaus, and Arrian. Sindhi soldiers fought in the army of Xerxes in Greece, and again Alexander the Great, providing men and elephants to the Persians, and fierce resistance again when Alexander invaded Sind. It was a Sindhi soldier who eventually wounded Alexander the Great, and caused his retreat from the land. The Vedas emerged from Sind, composed on the banks of the mighty Sindhu river. Even the esteemed Emperor Akbar was born in Sind of a Sindhi mother. Sind was the cradle of all ancient Indian civilisation.

When he pondered these facts, Mr Hathiramani was saddened further by his exile in Bombay. In Mr Hathiramani's opinion, pride in this heritage was lacking amongst his fellow Sindhi exiles in Sadhbela; resettlement had eroded identity. There were young people now who knew nothing of Sind, and who found their only heritage in a language spoken but never written, a few regional foods, and their distinctive names. Mr Hathiramani considered himself alone in Sadhbela in intellectual prowess, and took seriously the responsibility this placed upon him. Sometimes, waking at night with the moon on his face and the roll of waves in his ears, it seemed he had been chosen to lead his people back to a knowledge of

themselves. It was for this reason he had recently begun, in *Miscellaneous Past*, a translation of the work of Shah Abdul Latif, a medieval Sufi poet of Sind, mystic bard of their heritage. A knowledge of this heritage, thought Mr Hathiramani, implanted into every exiled Sindhi, was the only homeland they could now ever know.

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Mr Hathiramani finished reading the article on prostitution. His wife still slept at his feet. It was as he had thought: all high-class prostitutes nowadays were college-educated girls. It did no good to educate a woman. In middle age he had come to agree with the views of his parents. He dreaded now to think of his position without the lever of education to hold over his wife. Mr Hathiramani leaned back and stared at the ceiling; at his feet his wife snored.

He reached for his diary and, opening it, retraced the recent movements of everyone in the building. It had become clear there was a need for extra vigilance. Two days ago Sham Pumnani had returned home after losing his job in Japan. He had been accused in that faraway place of embezzling office funds. A man of so few scruples must be watched, Mr Hathiramani noted. No one in Sadhbela, in the trauma of Partition and the flight to Bombay, had fallen so far into misery or failed so utterly to recover themselves, as the wretched Pumnani family. Mr Hathiramani underlined again the note to watch Sham Pumnani.

Apart from Sham there was the problem of Mohan Watumal, who must also now be watched. Only the night before Mr Hathiramani had described Mohan Watumal as a waster, who did nothing to help his ageing father, but sat about in coffee shops, discussing impossible schemes. Distant cousins of Mrs Hathiramani had unwittingly offered their daughter in marriage to Mohan, not knowing he lived in Sadhbela. At this revelation they had promptly appeared to seek Mr Hathiramani's opinion. Mr Hathiramani had not minced his words, and opened his diary to reveal Mohan's layabout traits, clearly shown by his irregular comings and goings. Mrs Hathiramani's cousins expressed gratitude for such frankness and left to call off the engagement. Mr Hathiramani had closed his diary with a satisfied smile, but Mrs Hathiramani was worried. She spoke of the vengeance his mischief would arouse in the Watumals. Mr Hathiramani remained unperturbed, but made a note now, under the one about Sham Pumnani, to observe Mohan Watumal further as a precaution.

A thief and a waster. Mr Hathiramani sighed. Such now was the calibre of young Sindhi men. Impossible to think of a Sham Pumnani or a Mohan Watumal ever finding the courage to wound Alexander the Great. Mr Hathiramani turned once more to Miscellaneous Past in his diary, and the immortal Shah Abdul Latif. At his feet his wife continued to snore.

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, where she is now a citizen. Her multi-cultural heritage is reflected in her novels.

Also by Meira Chand:

Sacred Waters
A Far Horizon
A Choice of Evils
The Painted Cage
The Bonsai Tree
Last Quadrant
The Gossamer Fly
A Different Sky