

bakri, the badluck daughter

Jaspal Kaur Singh



Administrative Divisions map of Burma (present-day Myanmar).

The small town of Taunggyi – which literally means big mountain – in the Shan State of Burma is ablaze with pink cherry blossoms adorning the mountains. The cherry and pine trees, stirred by a fresh breeze blowing from the Greystone Mountain, whisper, and then getting excited, shout the news from the

Shan people to all the others in lower Burma, especially to those dwelling in the hot capital, Rangoon – *Taunggyi go la khe ba!* *Come to Taunggyi!* The Crag, the rocky mountain of Shan, is looking at the valley with a benign eye while *Taung Chun*, the sharp mountain with its *Phaya Taung* pagoda, looks away to

the east. The lovers' lane, *Mee Chaa Lun*, calls to all the youngsters with passion in their hearts and hope in their souls, escaping their parents' eagle eyes to break taboos and steal kisses. This borderland separates the mountains from the town, which is verdant with tropical trees, bamboo, *padauk*, and weeping fig, while mauve, pink, white, and yellow orchids cling between tree trunks and branches, as if finding a cozy place to rest.

I transplant these orchid plants from the cool shade of the mountains by gently prying them apart from the low-hanging branches. When I get home, I place them in coconut husks tied together with coir twines, then hang them from the avocado tree branches and the eave of the tin roof over the wooden veranda of our home. I tend to

these colorful transplants very carefully, fearful that they might not survive away from their home. Each morning, I wake up early to water the plants, careful not to drown them, and then gently touch them with my fingertips, one by one. My paternal grandmother Laaj, who hails from Rawalpindi in Punjab, and who has a beautifully lined forehead, like dried rivers, scrunches her eyes, her white chunni slipping from her white-haired head, and scolds me for touching them: *The oil from your fingers will discolor them; they will lose their beauty, first from having them transplanted from the mountain, and now from you touching them with greedy and dirty fingers!* But luckily for me and my family, they always manage to survive, blooming brilliantly to brighten our tinroofed home in the Shan States.

*Our house is built:
of cement and golden teakwood
the upper wooded floor slatted and crocheted
and the lower cemented level surrounded by an interlaced
fenced veranda while its corrugated tin roof—becoming a musical
instrument during monsoon seasons—hangs low to mossy grounds: the song
raindrops lullabies for us to burrow in bed during dreamy Shan mornings or snuggle and
fantasize in homemade quilts during balmy tropical Burmese nights in the land of greenghosts*

The house sits a little high in the Forest Quarters, kitty-corner from the Income Tax Office and opposite to the income tax officer's house, and away from the Indian part of town. It is surrounded by blue jacarandas, avocados, plums, pine, and oak trees. The garden Laaj plants is full of jasmine vines, dahlias, roses, and gladioli. Behind the kitchen in a patch of land, she grows corn, chayote squash, chili, cilantro, and tomatoes. She says she remembers her father's farm in British India in the far

reaches of Punjab where she used to live until the age of thirteen. Although the farm was green and productive, they barely had enough to eat as the taxes were high and they had many mouths to feed in the family. She was married off early to my grandfather Meher and came to live with him in Burma. As a young bride, she says, she used to dream of the malevolent Burmese *nats*, the green ghosts, the spirits of those whose lives were violently cut off in their prime, and the Shan cannibals

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bals, but over the years, she mostly forgot about these ideas. When Laaj was newly married, Meher used to work as a driver's apprentice, a spare, for his maternal uncle's transport business. His uncle had two lorries, and they went back and forth from Rangoon to Delhi carrying Indian-made goods, such as cloth, lanterns, bicycles, and other perishable products, like pulses and grains, for the local markets. That was a long while back, before the 1947 Partition of India, before they lost everything, before Meher died of a broken heart.

Laaj misses Meher and her other home in Punjab, so she tries to recreate the feeling of a farm in the little patch of land behind our house, especially planting okras and bitter melons. Meher used to love these okras and melons, especially when she stuffed them with crushed onions, garlic, ginger, spices, and a piece of tamarind, and would shallow-fry them on the tava on low heat for hours until they were crisp and golden.

Our home was not so lush and lovely before I was born in 1951. Laaj and Meher, along with their firstborn, my father Joth, and his brother, Ishar, used to live in the little shack behind Meher's small shop on the main road, next to the beer bars and in front of the small Sikh temple. Grandmother often told me about the small place, how they all slept in crammed quarters behind the shop. It was there, she said, on the main road, near all the Indian community members, many of them petty traders, tailors, and street cleaners, that her sons grew up speaking Burmese and Shan, their Punjabi stilted and odd to her ears.

Joth and Ishar were enrolled at the American Baptist Mission School through the help of their priest from the *gurudwara* where they learned to speak yet another language, English. But their education was disrupted due to the Japanese occupation of Burma in 1942. Adding to their many tongues, which Laaj had a hard time deciphering, they learned Japanese from their occupiers at their school. She loathed the Japanese soldiers, who were mean and rough with Joth and Ishar, but were particularly horrible to Meher at his shop. Most of the time, she used to tell us, they would take things without paying

for them. Once, on our evening walk around the Taunggyi water reservoir by the mountain, she said to me, *Palo, I try not to remember those terrible days, but they often creep into my dreams! Meher wakes me up, saying, Laaj, Laaj, you are safe. Sub theek hai!*

My mother Tej, when she was newly married to my father Joth, used to cook in the little kitchen with a wood stove, which she constructed from mud and cow dung mixed with chopped-up gunny sack smeared on to three big concrete blocks. My older sister, Bubbly, was born during the Japanese occupation. Even though she was a girl, Laaj made a big show of making sweets and distributing them to our relatives to celebrate her birth; but when I, the second badluck daughter, was born a few years later, Laaj refused to visit my mom, who was lying at the unsuitably named "Son Born Hospital," or to see me for almost a week. She said she felt redeemed at least because my brother, Happy, was born a few years before my arrival, so she could lift up her head in the Sikh community. She celebrated his arrival with not only *laddoos* and *punjjeeri*, but even got a *halwai* to make fresh *jalebees* for the Indian community!

We have a special bond, Bubbly and I, as she pays special attention to me, for both our *chi*, according to her, are strong. We are like our father. When Joth was a young boy, he got his long uncut hair stuck to the bottom of the muddy river and was believed dead, only to reappear, hours later, transformed. He grew up fast, and wise, after that moment. Bubbly said we both take after him. Ishar, she said, has a weak *chi*. And Happy, I asked? *He is a mixture of both Joth and Tej, a strong chi,*

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which he inherited from Joth, and a calm and quiet chi, which he inherited from Tej, our soft-spoken mother.

However, that was years later, after my parents fled to India and had to return to Burma during the Partition once Happy had been born. Their flight occurred due to the Japanese occupation. A year after Bubbly was born, Joth and Tej hid in the jungles of Shan States to escape the constant bombings conducted by the Allied Army on Japanese installations. Tired, hungry, and fed-up, they persuaded Laaj to return to Punjab and her home in Rawalpindi. Tej was pregnant again. The Japanese had been brutal to all the Burmese during the occupation. Joth was mistreated and beaten by the soldiers in his father's

shop. Ishar had to march with the Japanese and with Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's Indian National Army for many awful and brutal months during the 1944 Quit India Movement.

When he was just nineteen years old, Ishar was recruited by Bose, who beseeched all the sons of Mother India, particularly the firstborn in Burma, to free India from British rule. He made his fiery speech in Taunggyi and asked Indians to march to Delhi to fight the Brits — *Delhi Chalo!* The Japanese coerced or forced, one way or the other, the sons of India in Taunggyi and other parts of Burma to join the march. Joth was exempt from the army because he was married. Ishar went in his stead. Joth never forgot his brother's sacrifice, nor the shame of having failed Mother India, he told Tej. *I owe him.* Ishar became a *coolie* for the Japanese and Indian officers. He would often describe the torturous hikes in the jungles with heavy loads on his back, while the Japanese or Indian officers prodded him as if he were a donkey, especially if they thought he was slacking off. He returned home after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, exhausted, sick, demoralized, and unnerved. If the U.S. had not dropped atomic bombs on the cities, where thousands upon thousands of Japanese died, Ishar would have been marching and carrying loads for them for many more years! Ishar often mused if his lone life was worth saving. He would talk for hours about karma and dharma, wondering if he was a sage in his last life.

It was in 1946 when Laaj, Meher, and her children arrived at my grandfather's hometown, Peeyan, in Punjab. My mother, pregnant, and with a small daughter, had much trouble with her

health on the ship to Calcutta! The trainride was long and arduous, but when they arrived in the village, they were heartened by *diyas* set out by their Hindu and Muslim neighbors along the walls of their house to welcome them back. Within a few months, after Happy was born, however, Hindu-Muslim violence and slaughter began due to the imminent Partition, and the family had to run for their lives in the middle of the night. They heard the roar of *Allah hu Akbar*, *Har Har Mahadev*, and *Jo Boley So Nihal*, followed by torturous cries through many nights while they cowered in their grain room. They — my grandmother, my parents with two small children, and Ishar — had to walk for miles in the middle of the night. Meher refused to leave his home and stayed back, but Joth returned with an army truck and rescued him a few days later, as many Sikhs had already been slaughtered in the melee. Meher was hidden in a grain storeroom by his Muslim neighbors and was thankfully

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safe, although he never recovered from the violence he witnessed, nor from losing his home once again. A few days later, as they were leaving Lahore, their train was attacked. Men threw rocks and rattled their doors and windows, but miraculously they escaped all the way back to Burma. They lost their home and friends, and left with only their two small children and a couple of bundles of valuables. Laaj carried the key to her house for decades, mourning her lost home, her locked trunk with her good woolen shawls, embroidered *phulkari* bedspreads and *chunnis* which she had handwoven and handstitched as a young bride, and her few good silver dishes. Tej carried her children. She almost lost Bubbly along the way when the child dropped from her unfeeling hands as she tried to juggle the few warm sweaters she'd knitted and three salwar kameez she'd stitched for her daughter. Ishar stumbled on the small whimpering figure, picked her up, and carried her the rest of the way. *I often wondered if Ma meant to leave Bubbly behind in Punjab.* Joth carried a small cloth bundle with the few bits of jewelry they had and a few thousand rupees. Meher, who left with empty hands, started to drink heavily, succumbed to depression, and died soon after due, as Laaj would say, to his shattered kismet. Joth somehow managed to build a small shack on the main road of Taunggyi, and they began trading again by selling grandmother's gold bangles and purchasing goods from the borders of China and Bangkok to sell in the five-day market.

The next place they lived in was built mostly of bamboo with wooden stilts — my very first home. The Shan winds blew from the mountains to the

deck below the house during brutal winters. Some nights, I woke up to wild dogs, which I could see below between the wooden slats of the floor, howling. My cousin Kul and I, Ishar's firstborn and my agemate, used to hide under there during hot summer days. We could hear Ma and the beautiful Meeto Maci, my mother's little sister who was married to Ishar, complaining about Laaj and her constant comparison of them to other higher-caste Sikh women in the community. *What a fraud Laaj is, believing in jaati and paati and dares to call herself a Sikh!*

A few years later, we moved to this beautiful home with a cemented lower half, a wooden second floor, and a tin roof! Ma constructed another woodstove from cow dung, chopped gunny sack and mud, and three concrete blocks. We used to burn wood to cook our food on clay pots. Ma and Meeto Maci used the ash from the woodstove to scrub pots, pans, and dishes with coconut husk. I, the second badluck daughter, was always roped in to wash the dishes in cold water, or to crush onions, garlic, and ginger in the stone mortar and pestle for the daily curries.

Today, as I sit in the tiny kitchen crushing the ingredients, I mutter under my breath — *Why don't you ask Bubbly to wash the dishes? Why don't you ask her to crush the onions?* I already know her answer, *Oh, but Bubbly has so much homework as she is in the ninth grade.* Ma, gentle but mostly exhausted from the daily household chores, hears me muttering and, managing a slight laugh, calls me a goat, a *bakri!* *Why a goat, of all the creatures, I mutter! Chuckling, she says, because you, who help me the most, are like a goat who provides us milk, but who always manages to shit in the*

same bucket! It's true, I do help Ma with the household chores, ironing clothes, washing dishes, sweeping the floor, but that's because I'm always hovering around her for attention while Bubbly goes off reading novels or playing basketball! And Ma always praises her, saying what a good scholar she is! So, when I crush the onions, I pound them real hard, and mutter under my breath, scattering the onions and garlic on the floor, or sweep the dirt from one room to another, scattering the dust all over the house! Bakri, indeed!

Every month, a lorry-load of wood was delivered to our house. Papa would pay a few kyats to the brawny tattooed Paoh men who'd come down from the mountains on market day looking for odd jobs to have them chop up the wood. We children would then stack them in the woodshed. If we'd slack off when stacking, we'd get a caning from Ishar, the self-proclaimed disciplinarian of the family. The ones Ishar felt slacked off (do we really slack off, or does he only think we do, like the Japanese and Indian army officers thought he did?) he would line up against the garage door. It was mostly me, the muttering child and second useless daughter, or my brother Happy, the star and light of the Singh family, who would bear the brunt of his anger, especially if he could not locate Bubbly, his special target. Ishar told Ma he found Bubbly too feisty and too bold, wearing brightly colored dresses and makeup, or even worse, slack pants, ostensibly to practice basketball at her school, St. Anne's Convent. He was sure she really went to flirt with Donald, or Victor, or what's his name, Ko Ko Aung! *Those guitar-twanging convent high school boys who think they are Elvis Presley, or worse still, the Beatles! Sickening!* All this English Shinglish teaching, *he'd say!* He was fed up with it!

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At the beatings, we'd have to stand with our faces to the door, lift our frocks and expose our buttocks, or, in the case of Happy, lower his shorts. If Ishar couldn't find a cane, he would simply take off his leather thongs, the ones he always wore that distinguished him from our father, (who always wore polished black boots), and whack them on our buttocks and thighs!

Today, it is Sunday, so I loiter around Ma and Meeto Maci, who are preparing dinner. I am roped in to help them, as usual. After I finish crushing the onions, garlic, and ginger for the curry, I, along with Kul, Happy, and Bubbly, help stack the chopped wood in the woodshed. I hate it because I always manage to get splinters in my hands, but Bubbly and Happy are good and swift. Bubbly sings "*Chahey*

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koi mujhe jungle kahay!" in her musical voice, as she had just seen Shammi Kapoor's film *Jungle* a few weeks ago. Happy follows with a loud *yahoo!* We all laugh, trying to imitate Shammi Kapoor. Ishar, who had been in his room above the back veranda, resting after his lunch, suddenly appears and catches hold of Bubbly, slams her against the woodshed door, lifts her skirt up and exposes her flowered homemade panties — the ones Ma sewed. Ishar whacks the Slazenger badminton racquet on her flowered panties, her buttocks, and thighs. I cringe and mutter, calling him a *shaitan* for hitting my older sister, but we are all too afraid to openly confront him. Ma is cooking in the kitchen, which is housed in a little hut next to the woodshed and separated from the house by a little drain. When she hears Ishar hitting us, she sprints toward him and wrestles the racquet from his skinny but strong hands, telling him to stop — *bus karo!* Ishar, still angry but aware of her sharp voice, surprisingly backs off, and Ma, dragging the stoic but bruised Bubbly to her room, carefully applies soothing salve on her bruised skin, saying, *Why doesn't he ever hit his own son, Kul? Why my children, for Waheguru's sake?* Bubbly's dark eyes are staring out the window to the far-off mountains, her lashes damp, and she says to Ma, *One day I will show him.*

In the evening when Joth returns from the shop, Ma complains to him about Ishar, but all he says is, *Ishar learned the discipline as a soldier from the late Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose when he was in the Indian National Army, and from the British who taught him the adage, "Spare the rod and spoil the child," in the American Baptist Mission school. He is just doing his duty by us and teaching our chil-*

dren discipline and morality. Never forget, he took my place in the army and suffered for our sakes. I owe him. We owe him.

I miss Bubbly every day. She left for Rangoon to become a doctor when she was eighteen after passing her matric exam. Whenever she comes home during her summer breaks, I no longer recognize her, especially after the 1962 military coup and Ne Win's Burmese Road to Socialism. On the 7th of July 1962, she had taken part in the student demonstration against Ne Win's rule, which was suppressed and thousands of students were slaughtered. She had managed to escape with Aung Gyi, her classmate. He had literally dragged her from the scene, as she had stood there shattered and shocked. The next day, the military blew up their student union building — RUSU, the Rangoon University Student Union — and buried students' bodies in shallow graves around the city. When classes temporarily resumed, she was stunned, she

The next day, the military blew up their student union building — RUSU, the Rangoon University Student Union — and buried students' bodies in shallow graves around the city. When classes temporarily resumed, she was stunned, she told us, to see the body of Doris Lu Bu, her classmate, as a medical cadaver. She recognized her due to her curling and long eyelashes. Bubbly said, I will never forget that face as long as I live.

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Bubbly is back home from Rangoon, as Ne Win closed all the universities for four months. In her room, separated by the living area where I am reading a comic book borrowed from the school library, I hear her talking to Shirley, her classmate, about the underground student activism they are participating in. I think of how gentle Shirley and Bubbly are, but also about the new look in their eyes, eyes turned inward, steely and resolute.

Ishar, when we are eating together in the kitchen at the low round teakwood table, averts his eyes as Bubbly speaks about the demonstration. Joth says, patting Bubbly's hand, *What they*

did to the student demonstrators was terrible! And unforgivable! Then he looks at Ishar who stares steadily at him, chewing his roti slowly. *And I hope they do not come to Taunggyi to nationalize our shops and our schools. We will become poor overnight – again.* There have been rumors. Ishar warns us, the younger ones sitting at the table, about the military. *They can crush your spirits.* Bubbly, looking directly at Ishar, narrowing her dark eyes fringed by curling lashes, her round face stoic, says, *Or they can make you stronger, bolder, and a leader. Fear itself can act like a prisoner, so to be free, we will have to let go of fear.* I look at her beautiful eyes and calm face, but hear the steel behind her voice. Ishar, who is taking another bite from his roti and chicken curry, drops the bite on his steel plate, gets up, hurriedly washes his hands at the tap, and walks out from the kitchen into the dark starless Taunggyi night.



Jaspal Kaur Singh, professor emerita, Northern Michigan University, teaches English Literature at Oregon State University. Her monographs, anthologies, and poetry books include *Exiles and Pleasures*, *Taunggyi Dreaming* (Finishing Line Press, 2023), *Violence and Resistance in Sikh Gendered Identity* (Routledge, 2020), and *Representation and Resistance: Indian and African Women Writers at Home and in the Diaspora* (Calgary, 2008), among others. Jaspal was born and raised in Burma, lived in India and Iraq, and now resides in Portland, Oregon.