

Translation

Veena Verma

Dead Mouse*<https://doi.org/10.33063/os.v73.597>

Introduction: Veena Verma (born 2 September 1960) is a UK-based writer who has authored several anthologies of Punjabi short stories as well as one collection of poetry. She was born to a Khatri¹ family in Budhlada, which is a village in the erstwhile Bathinda District of Punjab, India. She completed her B.A.B.Ed from the Punjabi University Patiala. In 1984, she moved to England where she studied at the Institute of Higher Education as a student of social work. Currently, she works as a care manager in the social service sector in London. Verma says of her work that she doesn't write stories, rather she gives birth to them.² Verma publishes relatively infrequently, but when she does her work causes a stir in Punjabi literary circles. This is due in large measures both to the explicit nature of her woman-centered stories as well as the frank approach she takes to narrating them. Most of her subjects contend with deeply intimate aspects of women's lives, topics which are relatively rare in Punjabi literature with the notable exception of the widely-celebrated Amrita Pritam. While some in Punjabi literary circles are aghast by her literary voice, others celebrate the clarity with which she writes on complicated matters that many Punjabi women countenance. However, Verma is unapologetic about her subject matter, and her straightforward writing style—which are often viewed as salacious by more conservative elements in Punjabi literary circles. She explains that both are highly influenced by her Khatri background and the Jatt³ rural sentiments of Budhlada from which she comes.⁴ However, her stories also reflect her own subject positionality in the UK-based Punjabi diaspora. Verma's stories often narrate the challenges and tribulations of Punjabi women navigating the diaspora far from their natal homes in the Punjab, whether in Pakistan or India.

Verma's work deserves much more attention than it has garnered thus far in the Anglophone world. Oddly, even in the Punjabi language, there is little coverage of her or her work. While some aspects of her characters' plights are culturally distinctive, most emerge from situations in which women throughout the world find themselves. Some of her characters are trafficked into sex work struggling to escape into uncertain futures. Others are brought to the United Kingdom as a part of arranged marriages that satisfy the needs of men and their families but are poorly suited for the brides. Some of Verma's characters wrestle with infertility as pressures in the joint family mount against her. Domestic violence and sexual violence are recurrent themes across her stories. At the same time, her characters are often bereft of options because they are economically dependent upon patriarchal family, religio-cultural, and social structures to survive even while trying to escape the same. If her characters must carefully tread their own community, they often encounter racism and othering elsewhere.

Verma's characters are not easily exiled back to remote villages or resigned to remain in various reconstructed Punjabi worlds in the diaspora. Her characters often operate in Anglophone arenas in which they struggle to communicate, much less find safe spaces free of racism and misogyny. Verma simultaneously exposit the challenges that Punjabi women are forced to countenance—often unsus-

1 In the Punjab, the Khatri caste is that of merchants. All of ten of the Sikh Gurus were Khatri.

2 "About the writer," from *Farangiaan di nuunh* (Aarsi Publishers, 2020).

3 Jatt is another caste term which tends to reference rural, agricultural Punjabis.

4 "An interview with Punjabi writer Veena Verma by Bakhshinder Part 1," Kamaljit Singh Thind, August 21, 2011.

* Translated, with introduction, by C. Christine Fair, Georgetown University, United States, E-mail: c_christine_fair@yahoo.com

cessfully—while telling a more general story about the various dangers women routinely manage. While her protagonists fight to survive as women, mothers, daughters, sisters, or simply as human beings from their moorings in particular Punjabi communities, her characters' precarities are part of a global repertoire of female suffering, resilience, and survival. She writes into her characters well-articulated interiorities, which evidence heart-rendering sorrow and resilient resolve to survive. Verma denies her reader Panglossian conclusions, opting instead for outcomes that more closely align with women's lived realities.

This story, "Dead Mouse," is from her first anthology, *Mull Di Teeveen (Bought Woman, 1992)*, which caused considerable uproar in Punjabi literary circles. Her subsequent anthologies of stories include *Firangian Di Noonh (Daughter-in-Law of the Foreigners, 2002)*, *Jogian Di Dhee (Daughter of Yogis, 2009)*, *Ek Kudi Ikali (One Girl Alone, 2019)*. She has written one anthology of poetry, *Jee Kardai (I Desire, 2011)*. Several of her short stories have been rendered into theatrical or television performances. These include "Firangian Di Noonh," "Gulbano," "Khali Plot" (Empty Plot), "Sachchi Saanj" (Genuine Companionship) as well as "Chhoti Sardarni" (Younger Wife).⁵

* * *

She was standing in front of the mirror, completely naked. Her hair was scattered. There was a cigarette in her hand and an unsettling animality in her eyes.

While her complexion was wheatish, her golden face would flush a brassy tone when she was enraged. She would pout truculently after assessing those around her to be useless. There was nothing but antipathy in her gaze which seemed to hiss, "I hate all of you."

She rarely spoke. She ignored most questions posed of her. If she wanted, she would eat until she was full, shower, and keep herself tidy. And if she weren't so inclined, she would go three days without changing her clothes, would not so much as put a morsel of food in her mouth and would loll about her room. She would stare at the ceiling. A chain smoker, she would endlessly puff on one cigarette after another without break. The nurses would repeatedly implore her to eat, drink, and take her medications to no avail. She would throw her meds against the wall and get into fisticuffs with the nurses.

Sometimes a nurse would ask "Hello Mrs. Akhtar. How are you feeling today? How is your health?" She would growl with the fearful rage of a stray bitch protecting her pups "Is there something wrong with me? Am I sick?"

"No. I meant how are you feeling mentally. If you have any problems or complaints, just let me know. You are in a hospital and all of us are here to help you and care for you. You are mentally unwell. You have been brought to the hospital so that you can recover. We want what's best for you." The nurses would try to tweeze something out of her that would help them understand what ailed her.

"What's good for me? Then why was I brought to a hospital? You think I've lost my mind. I am not crazy. But you are going to drive me crazy. There should be some limit to this fuckery. You are constantly staring at me. I feel like I'm in jail. Why don't you just let me die? I want to die..." Then she would begin to howl from the top of her lungs.

The doctors, social workers and nurses would huddle, trying to find a way to persuade Mrs. Razia Begh Akhtar to abandon the thought of killing herself and learn to live instead. She had already tried to commit suicide several times unsuccessfully. Despite the passage of three months since being admitted into the Psychiatric Unit, there was no observable improvement in her condition. They ran all of the tests and scans possible on her brain. Her brain was not the problem. In defeat, the doctors

5 Veena Verma: Short Stories, Dr. Ruminder, February 3, 2004. <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL-D5RUWpO-vvnW6mhGd-bc0X0nnkFyc1I>

concluded that she should be sent back home. But upon hearing the word “home,” Razia would begin tearing off her clothes, wailing loudly and smashing the chairs and table.

The doctor told Hasiba, a translator who had come to the hospital from Pakistan, that she should speak to Razia in her own language to try to learn what’s going on in the patient’s mind. The doctors needed this information to better care for Razia and advance her case. Hasiba took out Razia’s file and read it. Razia was about 24 or 25 years old, of average height and build. She came to England from Pakistan and was married off some years ago to Chaudhry Rahmat Begh Akhtar, a successful businessman in London whose first wife had died. When he was fifty, he returned to Pakistan and had his wedding arranged with Razia, who was at that time a sixteen-year-old girl. Once she settled here, her health began to decline. Perhaps the atmosphere of England didn’t suit her? Gradually over time, her illness progressed to such a point that today she is in the Psychiatric Unit.

Hasiba opened the door to Razia’s room. She sympathized with Razia. Her bedding was in disarray. Her clothes were taken out of the armoire and strewn about. She was lying on the floor completely naked. Hasiba picked up her gown, placed it on her body, and sat down next to her on the floor. Then, she slowly took her hand into her own.

Sweetly, she urged Razia, “Put on these clothes, Razia. You are going to get cold.”

Razia did not respond. She remained lying there, silent with her eyes closed. Hasiba repeated the request several times, but Razia remained unresponsive. “She is a very stubborn girl,” Hasiba said to herself before stepping outside of her room, leaving her as she found her.

A half hour later, Hasiba returned and found that Razia had wrapped the gown around her body, was sitting in the chair, and smoking a cigarette. Hasiba felt somewhat encouraged.

Approaching the patient sympathetically, Hasiba explained to Razia, “You haven’t eaten anything for two days, Rajo. Eat something. You are wasting away.”

Razia asked abruptly, “Are you a doctor?”

“No.”

“Social worker?”

“No.”

“Nurse?”

“No.”

“So are you a patient? What do you do here? Every day someone or other comes here to annoy me.” Once again, that savagery stirred in her eyes.

Hasiba tried to explain, “I am a translator. I tell the doctor what you say because these white doctors do not know Urdu, and I tell you what the doctor says because you do not know English.” Razia fell silent.

Razia responded helplessly, “What are you going to tell the doctor?” I’ve already told them everything, that I’m not crazy. I don’t need any medicines.”

“We know you are not crazy but your...” Haseeba wanted to choose her words carefully, but Razi interrupted, incensed “So, why then have I been brought here? May Allah curse these doctors.”

“Leave it. Let’s not discuss this. Let’s go and eat something.” Haseeba wanted to feed her something.

“I don’t want to eat. I am not hungry. You eat something...” Razia pronounced as she lit her second cigarette.

Hasiba politely replied, “If you aren’t going to eat anything today, then I won’t eat anything either.”

Razia looked at her properly. Her eyes welled up with tears and she smiled slightly. She took a long drag on her cigarette, blew the smoke from her mouth, and began to sob. And she cried for a good long while. Haseeba put her hand on her shoulder and slowly began running her hands through

her hair. She brought Razia's head to her chest in the same way that a mother might comfort a crying child.

"What is the matter, Rajo?" Did I do something to offend you? Forgive me. I didn't mean to make you cry...did I say something wrong?" She begged Razia to forgive her.

"No. You didn't say anything wrong, Sister. You said very nice things. Very loving things. Those things that Bashira used to say. I am hearing them today after so many years from your mouth," Razi explained wiping her eyes.

Haseeba queried, "Bashira? Who is Bashira?"

"He was my neighbor's son...my friend. Whenever I became angry with him, I would stop eating or drinking. Trying to appease me, he would say 'If you don't eat, I won't eat either.'" Tears of wistfulness moistened her eyes.

"So, you would eat then?" Haseeba seemed to have some way into the fortress of silence and stubbornness that Razia had built around her brick by brick.

"Yes. I would eat. What else would I do? That unlucky guy loved me a lot. He couldn't be apart from me for even a minute. The poor boy loved me so much..." Razia sunk deep in her reveries.

"Then how did you leave Bashira to come to England?" Haseeba tried to extract more information from her.

"Trade. My stepmother sold me to Chaudhry Rahmat Begh Akhtar while I was still in school. I was quite young when I was married off and shipped away to England. When that happened, Bashira...He was crying, the poor thing. By the grace of Allah, he must be a handsome young man by now. Several years have passed, but he still hasn't forgotten me. The hapless boy loved me so much. Do you see this scar on my forehead? This is because of him. One day, while we were playing, he pushed me off the roof and I split open my forehead. After several stitches, this memento was stamped upon my forehead. Chaudhury Sahib has said so many times that I should get plastic surgery, but I really love this scar. This is the loveliest part of my body. My memory of Bashira. Even though most of my body seems dead, this part is still alive. I can still feel the warmth of his lips. That warmth he would give me whenever he would kiss my forehead, "Rajo when I grow up I am going to become a doctor and I am going to fix your forehead." Rajo's eyes again welled up.

"So did Bashira become a doctor?" Hasiba didn't want to let this string of thoughts slip from her hands.

"I don't know. I came to England. He had said that I would meet him on Eid when friends greet each other with hugs. But I could not meet him. The following day, he stopped me while I was walking.

'Why didn't you come yesterday?'

'I was obligated.' Seeing him suddenly in front of me, I became nervous.

'Obligated? Did your mother die?' He angrily retorted. With all of this sadness in the air, I burst out laughing.

'My mother has already died, my dear Bashira, and now I am also going to die. My stepmother has already arranged my marriage to Chaudhury Rahmat Begh Akhtar. I am going to England,' I explained to him tearfully.

'You're going to England? You're abandoning our love...leaving your Bashira?' He was incredulous.

'That's why I was coming to you, dear Bashira. Just take me somewhere far from here... I belong to you...no one else. Take me. Take me somewhere far...far from Lahore...far from the world. Far from my parents... Somewhere, where there is no Chaudhury Rahmat Begh Akhtar..' I threw my arms around him right there in that crowded market. Bashira turned cold. I grabbed his shoulders and shook them.

'Why are you quiet, Bashira? Speak up. Say something. Your childhood love is being stolen... Save me. Run off with me somewhere,' I begged him as I bawled.

'Where can I take you? I don't have work. I have no place of my own. Where should I take you? Your father will certainly ruin my father's life. We're neighbors... What should I do?' He shook his head in helplessness.

'So what should I do?' I asked him.

He said 'Do whatever your parents tell you. Obey your elders...' Then he left me standing in the street.

Then my marriage to Chaudry Sahab happened. At the time of my sendoff, my father cried. But there were no tears in my eyes. The previous night I overheard my parents talking. Perhaps my father objected to this marriage, but my stepmother finished the fight with a single argument. 'How much grief have I shouldered? Endless. She's a young woman. If she runs off with some boy, you'll lose your mind looking for her.' Father shut up.

I boarded a plane and came to England. A big house, a heavy curtain, silken carpets, expensive cars were all waiting for me, but along with those things, there were three children waiting for me.

Without doing a damned thing to deserve it, I became the mom to these three kids. I neither conceived them nor whelped them. I felt as if I had turned sixty overnight when these kids, who were my own age, began calling me 'mom' over and over again. My black, curly hair turned white. I had three heavy bundles put atop my head which my weak neck could not support.

On my wedding night, I was wrapped in a silken suit and sitting on the matrimonial bed. I went to the bathroom to wash my face and hands. In the sink, there was a cup holding a set of false teeth. I returned to the room and Chaudhary Sahab was laying on the bed. Toothless. I felt dizzy. When he took me into his old man arms, and called me 'my love,' I wanted to scream. It felt as if I was having sex with my father. For a long time, he was stroking my warm flesh with his cold hands. Then he became tired and fell asleep. A while later he was snoring and I, thinking of Bashira, cried the entire night. It was snowing outside, and it was snowing inside.

This happened several more times. Whenever I slept with Chaudhury Sahab, it felt like I was tossed into a grave with a corpse. I began sleeping in another room with the children. Chaudhury Sahab was happy that I cared so much for the kids. But there was bomb of sadness inside of me. I became anemic and rail thin. Chaudhury Sahab took me to see several hakeems, but none could cure me. The disease was spreading.

In those days, Yusuf, the son of some very distant relative of Chaudhury Sahab, had come to England to study medicine. Chaudhury Sahab discussed my illness with Doctor Yusuf. He did my checkup and he said that I would be fine. It's nothing to worry about.

'My head hurts so much...' I bemoaned.

'It will be fine. I am a pain specialist. Wherever you have pain in your body, I will make it feel better.' He then placed his hand on my forehead. He brought some tablets back from the market and instructed me to take them.

Even after taking the pills, I didn't feel any better. On one afternoon, I had a wrapped my head in a scarf hoping to get relief from the pain. Dr. Yusuf came to pick up his stuff.

'Do you have a headache?' he asked as he touched my forehead.

'Yes...Doctor Sahab...' I closed my eyes in pain.

He took some Vicks out of a drawer and began to massage my forehead.

I felt at peace. His hands wandered from my forehead to my neck. And then gradually his hands went to my bare back.

'This is a sin. On the day of judgement, you'll be damned...' I pulled my shirt down.

'This isn't a sin. I am healing a patient. You needn't hide anything from your doctor...' He grabbed my hand. I said nothing. While massaging my back, he was feeling my other body parts. His warm

hands felt like Bashira's hands. The fragrance of his body reminded me of Bashira. I had closed my eyes. His strong arms reminded me of Bashira's arms. Bashira... Bashira... And Dr. Yusuf disappeared from my mind. I was floating in this vision of Bashira.

After that, Dr. Yusuf would come to our house whenever he was free. He would massage me and cure me of whatever ailed me. I no longer had headaches and I felt fine. Chaudhury Sahab was happy that, in Yusuf's hands, by the grace of Allah, his wife had become healthy.

One day he told me in a sad voice, 'Razia...my studies are nearly complete. I will return to Pakistan... You will remember me, right?'

'You are returning, Yusuf? How will I live without you...I can't even imagine it...' I suddenly remembered my illness.

'I was also wondering how I will live without you, my love,' he declared poetically.

'Do something Yusuf. By God...I can never forget you. Apart from you, I have no one in this country.' I became all teary eyed.

'Okay. I'm going to take you away from this hell, Rajo. I am going to make you my wife. You divorce Chaudhury Sahab then we'll get married. How can I leave you like this?' He took me into his arms. I rested my head upon his shoulders... They were like Bashira's shoulders. That thing that Bashira couldn't do, Yusuf would. He is going to take me away from this life, full of humiliation. God has heard me.

Yusuf also worked in a store while studying. He was busy all day. So I had him quit his job and I paid for all of his expenses from my bank account. So at this point, he was either studying or having sex with me. One day, when he came to the house he was sad. For some time, he was laying down while mulling over something.

'What is going on, dear? Why are you so gloomy?' I could not bear to see him like this.

'It's nothing. I was just thinking about our life... that all of the time, I am either busy with my studies or trapped in your love. I haven't earned a cent, much less saved anything. When I return to Pakistan, how will I show my face? At the very least, I should've earned enough to open at least one hospital,' Yusuf explained. He seemed so miserable.

'You're this depressed over such a little matter?' Then I showed him my bank passbooks in which Chaudhury Sahab hid his off-the-book earnings.

'How much money do you need?'

'I only need about £10,000. I am a poor man. You, my dear, cannot live in poverty. The Taj Mahal was built out of love. While I cannot build a Taj for you, I will build a smallish house for you. For that, I only need another £10 thousand.'

So I took out £15,000 from my bank account and handed it over to him so that he could build us a house and a hospital.

Yusuf finished his studies and began to prepare for his return.

'Yusuf, should I purchase my Nikah suit from here or should I buy it when I get to Pakistan?' I also wanted to begin getting ready for my own return.

'Yes. I also wanted to discuss this with you, Razia,' he suddenly remembered.

'I understand that that you must be very worried about this... But I'm not worried at all now. You're okay now. By the grace of Allah, you are twice as healthy as you were when I met you. It's not as it was two years ago. You look so beautiful...' He sat near me on the bed.

'It's all because of you, Yusuf. Otherwise, I surely would've died. With Allah as my witness, I am indebted to you...' I said gratefully.

'Yes, I also wanted to say something for several days...but I never got the chance. And I am returning to Pakistan next week...'

'Pakistan? But I haven't made any preparations. So soon? Should I do my shopping? We won't be able to come back to London.' I had not understood what was going on.

'I am going alone, Mrs. Chaudhury. You are not going with me,' he declared icily.

'Alone? But what about me...?' I was frantic.

'You are going to stay here. You are no longer ill. You are fit. By the grace of Allah, you have everything, money, a millionaire husband, a life filled with the glamour of London. What will you do in Pakistan?' He answered my question with a question.

'Yusuf! We love each other. I could live with you in a hut. What will I do with bungalows and cars? I only want your love. To me, London is a graveyard. For God's sake, take me with you. Don't abandon me to drown in this. You gave me life... You are a doctor. After God, your name comes to my lips. Don't leave me in the jaws of death a second time...' I didn't know what to say.

'I am trying to explain this to you. It is our duty to do whatever we need to do to save a patient. You were dying, Rajo. You needed the body of a young man, someone's warmth. Just as the earth needs the heat of the sun which your old husband doesn't have. I swear to God! I treated you like a patient and now you are now healthy as a horse. My work is done... Done!' He ended the matter.

'My treatment? This was treatment? I thought you were in love with me!' I was still in disbelief.

'Love? Have you lost your mind? If a doctor falls in love with a patient, then they will only live for love and won't be able to provide professional medical services. It's a part of our profession to speak with patients with love... You can consider it as treatment or love...'

'But I gave you so much money to buy us a house. I took care of the expenses for your studies?' I asked him about the funds I gave him.

'What service did I provide?'

And in that very instant, I saw Yusuf not as a doctor but a prostitute who could sleep with any rich woman for money. He could take advantage of other women like me. I didn't say anything else. What could I say?

Yusuf left and I became lonely again. Neither did Chaudhury Sahab have any free time for me, nor did I have any need for him.

I again began to fall ill. My face again became sallow, and I began wasting away. The fire that once burned in my body was ash.

One day, a taxi driver who was renting a room in our house came to hand over his rent. I opened the door.

'What happened Mrs. Chaudhury? You seem unwell.' He said politely.

'Nothing special. I'm just not feeling well...' I answered.

'How could you feel well? Such a young beautiful married off to such an old man. People can be so cruel.'

I was surprised at his frankness.

'Your relative, Dr. Yusuf, left?' I became irritated hearing the name Dr. Yusuf.

'How do you know?' I asked.

'I know everything because I drive a taxi. I get to interact with all kinds of people. I keep the secrets of the entire town. I know which sparrow is flapping its wings and how many times it does so,' he said without pause.

'And what else do you know?' I was worried.

'Nothing, Razia Begum. He used you while flirting with others as well. I saw him several times with different girls, but I didn't tell you. It was none of my business,' he said in English. 'Who knows how many girls he bamboozled into thinking he'd marry them just to get their money and then he'd take off. He a gambling son-of-a-bitch.'

'Gambler?'

'What else? He gambled. He told the girls that he was a doctor. He'd trap them in this romantic con. After squandering all of their money, he'd gaslight them and pretend not to recognize their faces. Bastard fraud...' He pronounced scornfully.

My feelings about Yusuf had already soured, but I loathed him.

'You grabbed a bigshot when you nabbed that doctor, Mrs. Chaudhury. Had you taken the hand of a poor but honest man like me, I would've taken you away from here...' He said, frankly.

'But I have been spoiled. That wicked shit ruined me and ran off,' I told him lowering my face in shame.

'Women become pure every month, Razia Begum. Nature has bestowed upon you her very best gift, but otherwise, men call you impure and never let you live in peace...' This novel interpretation worked for me.

Then the story of Yusuf began again. I thought to myself 'this educated doctor made a fool out of me, perhaps this poor taxi driver will respect me.' But poor Ajit turned out to be even more clever than Yusuf. The son-of-a-bitch ran off with my jewelry. He took that stuff from my house and gave it to his girlfriend. My dresses, new suits, my makeup...he gave it to his lover. He used my bank card to buy things for that girl to whom he had been promising to marry for several years. I was his side business or a check that he could cash whenever the need arose. I gave him money and he gave me sex. He'd ask me for money that he would use to celebrate his girlfriend's birthday. Whatever things I bought especially for him at the store, he would take it for his girlfriend. He would spend hours at my house speaking on the phone with his girlfriend. He thought I didn't understand English. But sometimes women who understand quite a lot pretend to understand nothing. He reminded me of a child who takes his mother's stuff and gives it to the other children outside. He seemed so little in front of me. He didn't even come up to my ankles, but he had already become my addiction. I had already given up any hope that he'd settle down with me.

One day he was arrested in a murder case. He stabbed another taxi driver in the stomach with a knife for his girlfriend. His pictures were published in the papers. Chaudhury Sahab said that moving forward, we wouldn't rent to non-Muslims.

Ajit also left. But this time I didn't care much. I had become habituated to being hurt like this. I rented the room to some other young man. Then another. Then another. Another. Another. I don't know how many came and went. Hamid, Hasan, Mahboob, and Abid... They were all hungry for money. When I was in Pakistan, I knew that women are prostitutes. After coming to England, I learned that men are prostitutes too. Love can be a source of income. Just thinking about it makes me want to laugh. Men make so many dramas just to make a fool out of a woman. Whether it's making the Taj Mahal or tearing the stars from the sky. Every woman in the world wants some Shah Jahan to build a Taj in her memory but the Shah Jahans of today, want to sell her bones and live off of the profits rather than erecting a Taj atop her grave..

So many men have promised the Taj. But they don't even bother committing to making a home together. Every time, I was looted in the same way. The first time a woman gives money, she gives it out of love. The second time she does so out of sympathy. The third time, she does it because she needs to. The fourth time she hands over her money while cursing him.

Leave it. I don't have any complaints about anyone. The complaint I have is with Bashira. Why didn't he take me away from all of this? But now, these emotional things don't affect me. It's like going to the very bottom of the well and finding mud. So, I just drink the water from the top of the well. I don't go too deep because I don't want to get stuck in the mud. I can't count the men who have come and gone. How many men have enjoyed my body? But no one has reached my heart. How many have robbed me? But I am still unfulfilled. I'm like a river which doesn't notice if someone takes several pitchers of water from her. But no one has gone to those depths in which Bashira sat. He was settled deep within me. Whenever I would go off with some man, it seemed as if Bashira were in front of me...that same musk, those same arms, and shoulders. If I closed my eyes, I could imagine that whatever I was doing, I was doing with Bashira. Whatever man I was with, he was just a means

of being with Bashira and remembering him. I would get worried and run into the arms of some man. I have no idea how many men...no accounting of it..." Razia suddenly fell quiet.

Haseeba, the person who was searching for Rajo's deepest griefs and who herself was lost in Rajo's story, asked "You've never returned to Pakistan?"

"What reason would I have to go to Pakistan? Girls go to either meet their mother or their beloved and I have neither. The heart feels attached to them. The other relatives are just obligations. Fuck. These relationships are just like clothes. They become threadbare and you take them off. The relationship I had with Bashira wasn't merely physical. It's said that women never forget their first love. So true. I cannot forget Bashira for even one day. No one can take him out of my heart—not the borders of countries or the walls of time. Bashira is still there. But now when I find a new companion, I tell myself 'Apart from you Bashira, there is no one in my life.' Not only me, but every woman in the world says this. I swear to Allah, all women say this, no?"

"Men want to hear this. Even the wickedest man on earth wants the woman in his arms to be the purest woman. Even if he knows the truth, he will never want to admit it. And a woman should fulfill his desire by reassuring him that there is no man before or after him. Men will go on and on about the affairs they have with their lovers... 'I shagged this girl and that girl.' Just like soldiers brag about how many men they killed in battle, they will boast about the numbers of women they have had. But these matters are "Top Secret" when it comes to women. We shouldn't reveal what we did or with whom. Women are as deep as the earth. No one reaches the bottom. I like to say that where men end, women begin... Men talk but women keep our mouths shut." Razia laughed heartily.

"So men have come into your life. Have you ever settled down with anyone. ...someone of your same age?" Haseeba was incredibly sad given where the story ended.

"What kind of moron wouldn't try to settle down? I begged every man who came into my life to take me away from this humiliating life. But there was no place for me in anyone's home. They were all night-time companions. None of them could be seen with me in the light of day. Some were hungry for sterling while others were hungry for sex. I never met a soulmate. From Bashira to now, they have all been eunuchs. I have yet to meet a real man who could say to me, 'Come Rajo! Put your head on my shoulders and go to sleep.' No one's shoulders had the strength to bear the weight of my head. Just useless men... A bunch of swindlers, who would sleep with me at night. Then, just as I would fall asleep, they would runoff with my stuff." Razia got up and headed outside. Hasiba didn't think it was appropriate to bother her further.

A week later, another meeting took place with the doctor. The doctor explained to Razia that she has no actual illness. She should return home. But Razia was adamant that she would not go home. She told him that if she were sent home, she would commit suicide.

"What is the matter? Is there some problem at your home? Your husband loves you so much. What kind of life is here in this hospital?..." Haseeba translated what the doctor had said to Razia.

"Chaudhury Sahab's sister has come to the house from Pakistan, and she keeps watch on me constantly, Goddamnit. Where do I go? What am I up to? She reports everything to Chaudhury, howsoever trivial." She was on the verge of tears.

"You can tell Chaudhury Sahib that you don't like his sister," Haseeba said.

"Chaudhury brought her to keep an eye on me. To guard the honor of the house. All day long she follows behind me and at night..." She paused for some time.

"What happens at night," the doctor asked.

"At night, the old man Chaudhury puts his 'dead mouse' in my hand. It's my job to pick it up and bring it back to life. Why should I pick up his dead mouse? What did I do to deserve this? Would you pick it up? Doctor, would you pick up the dead mouse?" She posed these questions to Haseeba.

The doctor cast an inquisitive glance towards the female translator. What was Razia saying, his eyes seemed to ask. But Haseeba had no word in her English dictionary for "dead mouse."