

In the middle of my twelfth year I awoke to a morning of unsurpassable beauty. The everlasting heat plaguing the village had subsided for the moment. A gentle wind rustled the rushes of the roof. Teasing sunlight eased through the openings below the roof of our narrow sleeping chamber. Our angareeb, lined up in a row with hardly a hair to squeeze between them, left barely enough room for a path to the door. I sat up and looked at the sleeping forms of Hamida, Nazila and Shirin. Shirin was named by her father who worked for many years in Iran, and developed a fondness for all things Persian. I felt great joy and goodness in my heart, a goodness extending to the sleepers, the beauty of the morning with its silent freshness, and the village which made up my whole world. Deep emotions led me to pray the introduction to Surah 87:

*“Wonderful are the ways of Allah  
In creation, and the love with which  
He guides his creatures’ destinies,  
Gives them the means by which to strive  
For maturity by ordered steps, and reach  
The end most fitted for their natures.”*

I was lost in the beauty of these words, envisioning the love and care lavished upon us by the Creator, when I was disturbed in my reverie.

“Why are you praying?” asked Nazila, from her angareeb. “You know that women don’t have to observe the morning prayer as men do.” Then she laughed, “Let them pray for us when they go to the mosque.”

“Don’t speak like that, Nazila,” I said, hurt, because Nazila, the indolent one, aimed her cobra fangs at my heart. She knew the words would cause me grief, and she knew well that the men would never pray for women in the mosque. Oh, they would pray for a son, a job, a business deal or even a camel, but never for a woman.

At fifteen, Nazila was the oldest among us, lazy and rebellious. Rebellious, because although she was pretty, strong and of good parentage, no one had claimed her as a bride. It must have been the uncertainty of her fate that made her so sharp-tongued. She quit attending school at thirteen and had chafed under the control of our sharp-eyed grandmother ever since.

Every day Allah made the aunts scheme of ways to find her a husband. It seemed the chatter surrounding her imagined husband never stopped. Secretly, I, too, was afraid that no one would want to marry me since I was going on thirteen and no one had even glanced in my direction.

The moment I left my bed that morning I knew that something extraordinary had occurred. As I walked, I felt a warm sticky wetness between my thighs. Exploring, my hand was bloodied and I knew that now I was like the other girls in the room. They rejoiced when their blood came, giving proof that now they could become mothers, but I, far from rejoicing, felt only bewildered and frightened.

Also, there was a grinding pain in my back where I had never experienced pain, and my belly felt swollen and tender. Suddenly, I wondered what had become of my glorious morning. It seemed the sun shone less brightly, and despite the breeze, I was sweating.

*Anything that happens down there is connected with pain,* I thought and went in search of my mother.

“Now, Amina is fully a woman,” trilled my mother to let all the aunts know that I bled, and in the privacy of her bed-corner she initiated me into the women’s age-old rite.



About the time of my first blood I recall two equally monumental events. First, I remember I was lying on my angareeb feeling drowsy when the winds suddenly began to blow from the desert. Dust permeated the air and I had to cover my face in order to draw my breath. Within minutes, the shawatin of the desert howled with deafening strength. I knew, of course, that a freak, unseasonable storm had come to punish the village once again, and yet my terror was as strong as the first time.

Sand and bits of reed sifted through the roof, the wooden supports groaned and creaked as the unrelenting storm pressed against our house. My sheet lifted and swayed as I held onto the edge. Outside, I heard flying objects crashing against the compound walls, pounding and banging. The force of the wind increased and demons and jinn added their shrill voices to the infernal howl. I burrowed into my mattress praying for Allah's help. This calmed me a little. I realized suddenly, mastering my fear, that sometimes the shrieking was not the wind or devilish in origin, but came from the mouths of my roommates. Shirin's screams were louder than anyone's.

Then the unthinkable happened. With a mighty groan, an unseen force lifted the entire roof from the walls. Instantly, invisible hands pulled and prodded my body and a howling devil above tried to suck me into the sky. I found myself clinging to Hamida while clutching my mattress at the same time. My sheet was long gone, sucked away by the devils above. Where the roof supports tore from the wall, loose chunks of hard baked clay fell to the ground, and I heard the screams of unlucky people hit by these missiles. Mercilessly, sand showered upon us, biting and stinging our skin.

When I thought I couldn't tolerate anymore, the howl increased to yet a more ferocious pitch, and Hamida and I were lifted off the ground. I thought my life would end this very moment, that we'd be dragged into the air and blown away like dry leaves in the breeze. Just then, I heard a monstrous sigh, like a giant exhaling, and we were suddenly dropped to the ground. Tumbling onto shambles and sand, we landed, still clutching each other, our mouths rimmed with sand, our hair stiff and wild. Moments later the wind completely subsided and an unearthly silence enveloped the village.

The wail of an infant broke the frightful spell, and moments later we heard shouts. I heard my father calling for Umma Reha and Mother, and then a great babble ensued. Chaos reigned. Hamida and I brushed the sand from our faces and shook our hair to rid it of dirt. We scarcely had time to dress when we heard

the haboba's voice above the din demanding that we attend to her, at once.

Grandmother was the only woman who had a room to herself. It was a medium-sized room, by our standards, with a well-made, colorful carpet of Arabic design covering the floor, and a large round opening in the wall that led to the hosh for air circulation. Her angareeb was thicker than any of the women's and was shrouded in white, fluffy cotton. We found her laying motionless looking like a brown caterpillar trapped by giant twigs. Two small beams, with the roof's thatch still attached, had pinned her to her bed.

"Move, you lazy women," she snarled. "How long do I have to put up with this indignity? Lift this thatch off me before a scorpion puts his tail into me!"

"Umma Reha, are you hurt?" my mother cried.

"No! No! No! Just let me out of here."

Thank Allah, my father, Halim and Khalid rushed in and lifted the broken supports and the thatch. I was astounded. No one seemed to notice that we were not wearing the tob, that Haboba's legs were visible for a few moments, and that the men's upper bodies were bare.

The next day, the destruction caused by the storm brought about another unusual situation. At day break everyone was in the streets. Men, women and children all milled about. Propriety was forgotten for this instant in time. Like flocks of birds chirping and squawking, we staggered from home to home viewing the devastation. Three children had died, few homes were left with a roof, even the strong walls had crumbled, and many people were injured. Men and women cradled broken arms, lifted bruised faces to the rising sun, hobbled painfully, and our haboba could not walk.



The second monumental event in my placid life began amid the ordinary preparations for a morning meal, when Grandmother called Hamida into her presence. Everyone was banished from the women's living room where she sat in private audience with Hamida. The rest of us, full of curiosity, milled about in the kitchen yard pretending to be working. Lively, excited guesses about this conversation flitted from mouth to mouth. Hamida's mother was also absent, which gave sustenance to more gossip and suspense.

"It stands to reason," smiled Sasat, "that someone made a proposal for her. And now Grandmother, who likes form and tradition, prepares her for

the talk with her father.”

The rest of the day passed slowly. At last, A’isha, Hamida’s mother, appeared and announced her daughter’s betrothal. We sighed joyfully. A wedding! Nothing better than a wedding ever happened in a girl’s life. I had begun to comprehend why this was so. It seemed to me that weddings and births were the only events in a woman’s life that granted her attention. Therefore we rejoiced.

“Allah blessed my daughter,” purred A’isha with unusual delicacy. “She will be married to Fahid Mahdi, and living in this honorable, prosperous family, she will never lack for anything.”

Indeed, she spoke truth! Hamida was fortunate to marry into the Mahdi family. They were wealthy and belonged to a clan that preferred women from our family above others. When the aunts spoke of Fahid, they marvelled.

“Velvety, hot eyes.”

“Tall and straight as the corner beam of a house.”

“Sleek, like the horses of the army patrol that rides through the village twice a year.”

I had noticed Fahid at a wedding, because Hamida, pinching my arm painfully beneath my sleeve, pointed him out.

“Over there,” she’d hissed into my ear, “the young one behind your father.”

“With the blue turban?” I asked.

“No, you silly goat. That one is much too old to fancy. The one with the small moustache. Mmmh,” she murmured. Then, slyly, almost challenging, she directed her glance fully at him for a fleeting moment. She was clever doing such things undetected. She was like her mother, A’isha, in this respect—clever at deception. Hamida’s deft games amused me. Because I did not have the courage to openly look into a man’s face, I participated vicariously in her daring. Apparently her gamble paid off; Fahid had noticed her at that particular wedding, and she was soon to become his wife.

We scarcely ate that evening—we were too busy congratulating Hamida. Some of the aunts with marriageable daughters clearly felt twinges of jealousy at Hamida’s great luck. Their good wishes sounded stilted and carefully worded so as not to reveal their own disappointments. Yet, once we sat in a circle on the floor mats and reached for the food set out on large platters in the center, everyone was truly happy for Hamida.

The weeks following the marriage proposal were long and lonely for me

as Hamida trained for her new duties. The aunts claimed her early in the mornings and released her late at night, and so we never spoke about her approaching wedding. How I wanted to ask her what it felt like to be a bride. Was she afraid of her future, anxious, ambivalent? Did she wonder what kind of a husband Fahid would be?

My concerns about my own future grew. Everyone, including Mother, praised my father as a devout Muslim, a devoted husband, provider and father. He treated Mother with kindness and respect. But in every family there were men like Sasat's husband, Halim, who were painfully negligent in their familial duties. Others demeaned and struck their wives, and neglected their children. The women had a saying: "A woman never knows to whom she will be married, to ugliness or beauty, to good or to evil; it's all in Allah's hands."



Hamida left for the Mahdi's quarters in July. I remember it well, because it rained for the first time after the long draught. Outside, in the hosh, women and children welcomed the gentle drops with upturned faces and open, reaching hands. They rejoiced as droplets fell on their faces, but the moisture on my cheeks were from my own bitter tears. I felt as if the heavens grieved with me, for Hamida's exodus marked the end of our life together. I'd seen many friendships die upon marriage and the finality of her leaving filled me with great, unconsolable sorrow. Hamida's wedding had been a grand event at the end of June. Indeed, so splendid a celebration, that the aunts talked about its opulence for months thereafter. A herd of slaughtered goats, braces of pigeons, mountains of saffron rice with raisins and dates, the finest bread, the coolest fruit drinks and the best tea were served, laid out on carpeted floors under enormous tents. The Mahdi's guests sat circling the bounty, using their right hands to stuff their mouths. The unclean left hand was best kept hidden.

Trickles of light falling through the tent cloth caused the women's skin to glow rosy, and in their silken finery they became animated and alive. Not wearing the everyday white for the feast, opulence reigned. They were adorned in gold and precious stones and wore richly colored, expensive garments. The daring sported bright-green, blue, orange and even multi-colored tobs with long sleeves gracefully hanging, waving with the motion of the wearer, awakening thoughts of butterflies. The men, puffed with dignity,

wore mostly black or white robes, but their turbans, kaffiyehs and even a few fezzes, burgundy red and black-tasseled, attracted the eye.

Upon entering the tent we had been greeted by sweet air perfumed with rosewater. Now, the tantalizing scents of cinnamon, cardamom and of saffron mingled with the heavy smell of mutton and beef. Breathing deeply, I felt sated, as if I needed no food. After a period of feasting the empty platters and trays were cleared, the white cloth covering the carpets was removed, and the dancing began. For three days the age-old sequence of feasting and dancing continued unchanged.

As required, I danced every dance, but my heart was not in my motions. I forgot myself and stared straight into the eyes of a good-looking man, nearly tripping over the edge of my tob. Feeling ashamed and clumsy, I thought Mother would be angry. Instead she asked me, somewhat preoccupied, whether I had taken good measure of this man. Did I like his looks?

“Yes, why do you ask?”

“He is a cousin of yours on his mother’s side.”

Mother’s preoccupation piqued my curiosity. Inconspicuously, I attempted to view this cousin and, finally succeeding, I was not displeased. He was a bit older than Fahid, perhaps twenty-three or twenty-five. He was tall, straight and fairly light of color. His face, narrower than most, was dominated by a prominent nose and ended in a square lower jaw. I liked his eyes best. They were not romantic and velvety like Fahid’s, but I thought that an inner goodness shone out through them. I asked Nazila if she knew him, and as I expected, she did.

“He is Yussuf, the eldest son of Zajid Nasredi, the textile merchant.”

I had heard of this family’s greatness. Their young men worked in Khartoum managing an export/import business with a great store and storage houses. In the village they owned a compound of elephantine proportions occupied by an ancient grandmother and village kin. South, along the Nile river, lay their farm, which they leased to be worked by fellaheen. Such prominence intimidated me. I assumed that a man of such wealth, living in the city, had lost adat. I had heard that city men forgot customs and traditions, and married city women. So, I dismissed thoughts of Yussuf Nasredi at once.

While we feasted, Hamida was in seclusion, and I wondered if she felt lonely and deprived. As I look back, I think that perhaps she felt nothing of the kind, because she knew her importance as bride and performer. Tension

arose among the guests in expectation of the bride. The guests from the other tents came and sat among us. Finally joining us, Hamida was led by her escort of women to the tent's center where the precious dancing carpet awaited her bare feet.

Covered by the bridal shawl she could barely see her feet and needed guidance. Fahid arose from his pile of large, square cushions and slowly walked to Hamida. Motionless, he stood before her. Then, slowly, sensually, as if unwrapping a gift, he removed the bridal shawl.

She looked chaste and young, almost downcast. My eyes searched every inch of her figure for a sign that at least part of her impish, challenging spirit had survived the bridal preparations. Not the slightest movement hinted at her former spirit.

When she began her dance, I admired the perfection she had attained through the years of ceaseless repetition. She performed with dreamlike ease and beauty, and we all sighed and marvelled at her grace. Hamida danced for half an hour, longer than most brides, and then, before assuming the position of submission, she turned slightly, facing the women of our clan, and for a most fleeting moment her wide, wicked smile covered her face.

Hamida was led away, and our women bemoaned her fate during that first night of marriage. I had heard enough whispers to know that whatever the night might hold for the bride, pain would be a part of it, and so I prayed that she be spared any torment.

The next three months passed by in a dull fog. I lived, but my presence made no difference and left no record. I wept, but the hot air drinking my tears cared not for my sadness. I was as one dead.



Our family was enthralled by Sasat's new baby. They passed his brown little body from arm to arm, and appeared lost in admiration for her beautiful boy. Sasat glowed as if she had performed a miracle, and perhaps she had, because Halim was much in evidence those days strutting about, his chest thrust out like a proud pigeon.

It was then, shortly before the ninth lunar month, at the beginning of Ramadan, that A'isha found me in the yard. She spoke formal words designed to impress on me her daughter's importance.

“Amina, tomorrow I will visit with my married daughter and the ladies of the Mahdi’s. Hamida invited you and I accepted. You realize that this is a great honor for you, and I expect you to attend me after the midday meal. I spoke to your mother and grandmother, and you are free to come.”

I was only too happy to follow her summons. Although I had been to the Mahdi women’s hosh when playing with their brood as a child, I had never been inside the house itself. Of course, I hoped to see Hamida privately and maybe she would confide in me about the secrets of married life. Most of all, I wanted to know if there was pain.

Our visit was formal and ceremonial. Leaving our sandals at the door, we were ushered into the women’s living room. We were seated on plump pillows stuffed with cotton around the edge of an old, large Persian rug. Its brilliant colors had miraculously withstood time and wear. In retrospect, I marvel that even the richest homes dulled the senses with their monotony. Islam forbids representation of the real world because mere humans cannot compete with Allah’s creations. Pictures, paintings, sculptured forms are abominations—our art is represented by arabesques woven into carpets and in tiled mosaics adorning the mosques.

At the end of the large room the haboba of the Mahdi’s was throned on fancy silk cushions. She was flanked by Hamida, glowing with pride and importance, and A’isha, the guest of honor. The rest of us were arranged according to status. Proximity to the grandmother indicated high rank.

We were offered fragrant tea and a sumptuous assortment of pastries, fruits and sweets. By A’isha’s beaming face I was able to measure the extent of honor bestowed upon us. The polite, stilted talk around the carpet was no different from any other everyday talk. After a while the tea loosened the women’s tongues, and they gossiped with abandon. On my end, two older girls amused themselves by accusing each other with slyly veiled references of being the love object of a disgustingly fat older man.

“To our misfortune he is very rich and looking for a wife again,” they whispered, rolling their eyes. Comparing him to a hippopotamus they cast aspersions upon every unmarried girl’s fear, the proposal of a dreadful suitor; a proposal of such munificence that a father would accept, despite the man’s age, physical unsuitability, or the presence of other wives. Each of us hoped fervently that we should not be the fat man’s choice.

Upon our time to depart Hamida rose and came to me. Slimmer than

before, her kohl-lined eyes larger, she looked older, more mature. The sweet, innocent roundness of her face was no more. She smiled, basking in my sincere praise of her home's beauty, the splendid tea and the sweetness of the women. Asked if she was happy, she said yes. When I asked if there was pain in marriage her face clouded, her eyes became as empty as the desert, and she quietly said yes, but spoke no more.



Later that night, and for many nights to follow, the dominating, stultifying fear of being unmarriageable stole my sleep. My cousins who were the same age as I were now all married, and I had danced at their weddings. Even Nazila, bitter and sharp-tongued, had been claimed by a man. In the still hours of the night the childish, sleeping sounds of the younger females, barely healed from their cutting, surrounded me. Their soft sighs and moans, rooted in nightmares of recent pain, awakened me often. They lay, their round, innocent faces half-exposed, their cheeks dewy with tears, their bodies curled, shrinking into mattress and cover, as if struggling to do in sleep what they could not in day's light—to hide from a most cruel world.

Already I was fourteen, yet not the slightest inquiry had been made as to my availability. Of course, my aunts wounded me with well-chosen barbs; each missile exposing my unhappy state of affairs. Usually, before an actual proposal, negotiations between families resolved the material arrangements of both sides. These discussions of intent indicated a woman's marriageability, but it seemed that no one noticed my existence, or, if one had, he found me unworthy of inquiry.

However, by no means was I looking forward to marriage. Daydreaming over my chores I allowed myself to dream of attending school forever—of writing verse and of writing fanciful tales. The pleasure I derived through the beauty of the written word could never be shared with anyone. Apart from being heretical, such pleasures would have been deemed silly affectations. Sweeping the courtyard, I entrusted my verses to the sands, erasing them instantly when footsteps approached. I wrote lines such as, "I am, yet my shadow imprints the world as much as I."

To learn, that is what I longed for. However, I knew well that an unmarried woman counted for nothing. To begin with, her share of the family's wealth never reached her fingers, but stayed in her brother's hands. To this day,

depending on a male's disposition, he may allow a woman to exist somewhat independently, perhaps even with a certain amount of dignity. More often than not, she subsisted at the whim and sufferance of others, subjected to neverending service.

How I dreaded such a fate. Our house sheltered two of their kind. Yet, although our father was a just man who looked after them as the Qur'an directs, and our grandmother was kinder than most habobat, I pitied these aunts. Always, they carried other women's children, wiping their faces and bottoms, showering love and care on another's fruit, never allowed to bear and tend their own. Worse, some of these castoffs had grown older and become wild in their ways. They danced unseemly, provocatively when in a group, and were unaware or disregarding of their appearance.

Contemplating such harsh realities I instead submitted to the ordeal to be endured: marriage. Although divided against myself, I hoped that some man, neither ugly nor cruel, should find me to his liking and save me from a spinster's fate.

Sometimes, kneeling before the hot griddle, pouring batter onto its sizzling surface, I thought that perhaps girls were prepared for life and marriage in the same manner that made bread wholesome. Were they not treated much like the grain? First, they were pounded and crushed, then given over to searing heat and pain. Who, I wondered, had determined that we should be treated thus and not in kinder fashion?

Meanwhile, as usual, new sons born to lucky mothers dominated everyone's attention. Seasonal changes determined our way of life, and the religious holidays and observations commanded the attention of those responsible for the ordered ebb and flow of our family's life. Grandmother, Father and uncles handled our affairs and conducted the rituals.

More than the seasonal or religious high days, my memory holds the few times when the dullness of my shadow life was punctuated by commands to attend to my father. Whenever he returned from a journey to the quiet of his own home, Father became philosophical and reflective. He often meditated on the transience of life, contemplating his demise. In such moods he'd call for me to recite meaningful surahs, so that he could elicit the wisdom of the ancient words to better understand his existence and the afterlife.

Father, so different from his own sons, had little schooling. His father, a trader, taught him the intricacies of a small caravan's success, and eventually left

him the business. From the time my father was nine he accompanied Grandfather on caravan treks. So it was that he could barely read or write, but had discovered the world of numbers in such a wondrous way that he never encountered problems he could not solve. He was well known in the village for this ability, and was often prevailed upon to solve the financial problems of others.

Those occasions, when he summoned me to his divan, became unforgettable events for both of us. He was the only person, save a child, with whom I could share in the charmed beauty of poetry. Although he never said much, I believed that he derived a deep feeling of peace and comfort from my efforts, for the mildness and calm of his face spoke of quiet joy.

By now my days in the village school had ended, leaving me only one book, the Qur'an. Not that I had much time to read. The women in our family were as fertile as pigeons. Their work, abed for forty days of childbirth and recovery, fell upon all others. Therefore I often knelt for hours in the hosh grinding sorghum in the hollow of the huge grinding stone for our bread. Other times I mended garments and tended the small children.

One little girl in particular warmed my heart. Khurshid, Sasat's eldest, came into her seventh year, and I saw myself in her when I was her age. She was agile and quick and had a smiling, oval face, dominated by deep, dark eyes. Her hair was kinkier than the family preferred, but the tight, frizzy curls seemed to belong atop her head as a sign of her spirit. Khurshid moved about, dipping and darting, as the swallows do that visit the river's shore each spring.

Best of all, she was bright. Intrigued by her intellect, I recited verses for her and was gratified that she understood the magic of poetry. Whenever I saw her, I prayed that one day I should be given a daughter just like her. My love for her was reciprocated with the greatest tenderness. Mornings, she awaited me in the hosh with the patience and alertness of the she-camel looking for her offspring. The moment she spied me she was quickly by my side, as if the wind had carried her.

"Salaam, Amina," she'd shout joyfully, "what will we do this morning?"

And then she would cheerfully accompany me to the tasks determined by our haboba, helping me as strength allowed. There were times when the haboba sent her away from the hosh. Girl children carried water because women, enclosed in voluminous tobs, could not transport the vessels.

When Khurshid was sent to the well, I fretted, for she was much too small for the task. The zirs, our water jars, were made of pottery, more long than

round. Porous, they allow the water to sweat from the clay and to evaporate, thereby cooling the water inside. Some were so large they held forty liters of water or more. In the hosh, by the entry door to the house, sat a stack of zirs, from which the small girls chose the one they could carry when filled.

I watched Khurshid struggle to empty her zir into a larger one many times in one morning. After a few trips to the well she could barely lug her heavy zir, nevermind pour the water into the larger jars with a steady stream. I would help her whenever I could, but often the women forbade me to help.

“Amina, you are spoiling the girl. What’s to become of her if she does not learn early enough that a woman’s life is hard work? How can she bear sons when she can’t even pour from a jar?”

Rebellious thoughts surfaced. I would ask myself why water carrying and hosh sweeping conferred the power to bear sons? I wondered also why water carrying was only work for small girls?

My brothers were older and stronger than I, yet they never carried anything. They were allowed to uselessly roam the village and the surrounding areas to the torments of the farmers whose grain they trampled, and the water fowl along the river, which they shot with their sling shots. While they flew about in loin cloths or short pants, their chests bare, our bodies were wrapped even during heat spells when the temperature soared past one hundred degrees.

To relieve Khurshid’s drudgery, I would bake *kisra* for her, a food she desired above all others. I would sweeten the last hot cakes off the griddle with honey or syrup, and roll them up. These we ate with gusto, gleefully hidden behind the kerosene barrel. There, safely ensconced, we would hum songs or solve riddles.

“Halim goes to market to sell a camel. ‘I want you to pay me for these two camels,’ he says to the first buyer.

“‘Allah, the Great, has given me two good eyes,’ replies the buyer, ‘and with these I see only one camel. So, why would I pay you for two?’

“Halim whispers into the buyer’s ear whereupon the buyer pays for two camels. What did Halim whisper into the buyer’s ear?” I would ask her.

Joyously she would shout, “The camel is pregnant.”

Given time, she correctly figured out the answers to my riddles. We relished these hidden moments.

Then one morning, during the season of *ayam el tahir*, Khurshid was not waiting for me. Moments later I learned that she’d been taken to be circumcised.

In my mind I saw Hadija kneeling between Khurshid's tiny legs, performing her gruesome task. Suddenly, I hurt again with all the torment I thought had been forgotten. Although it was the season of ayam el tahur, I had preferred to think that they would not yet take her. Khurshid looked so tiny, so birdlike and fragile, that I erroneously believed tender Sasat would postpone the cruel ceremony until the child was older.

I never saw Khurshid again. That night she bled to death in her sleep. In the morning Sasat's wails filled the air, tearing our souls as hands rend cloth. My little swallow was no more, a sacrifice to the ideal of female purity. But, then, I did not yet entertain such heretical thoughts. Like the other women, I wailed and bemoaned her fate, but dared not blame the barbaric custom and the women who kept it alive. Blaming custom and an unchanging culture came later in my life when education tore the veil of deception from my eyes.

Khurshid, dead, became more precious to Sasat than she had been in life, for Sasat had truly loved Khurshid. More than any of the other women, Mother included, Sasat possessed a rare appreciation for fine things, including the different and unusual, such as her daughter. Her loss was deep and real, and she grieved for a long time.

Yet my grief was greater because I knew her child better. I'd seen Sasat lavish more time and care on her son than on both daughters, and I wondered whether she had wholly understood the depth of her daughter's quick mind, her joyousness, goodness and her power to brighten life.

How I missed Khurshid's small hand in mine, her careful way of capturing every last crumb of kisra. My day began with tears because I missed her joyous Salaam. For the longest time a breeze stirring a leaf could startle me into looking for her, as the sound was fleeting, like her movements.

I grieved and I brooded. Why had they taken her so early? Why at all? I knew all their reasons, but that didn't alter my pain. It was done in the name of controlling passions. So, in the end, a woman was left without any passion at all. It was as if she were dead.

After many months my emotional turmoil subsided, yet deep inside me I nurtured cold hatred against our haboba, Sasat, my mother and Hadija, the cruel circumciser. It was women who killed Khurshid. It was women who pinned her down, and women who had mutilated her, and it was women who sang joyously outside all the while.