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**Separation Without End:  
Translated Excerpts from Surjit Sarna's Book,  
*Vichode Ban Gaye Sadiyan***

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**Abstract**

This paper provides excerpts from a new translation of noted Punjabi poet Surjit Sarna's book, *Vichode Ban Gaye Sadiyan*, written after the death of her husband, Mohinder Singh Sarna, also a noted Punjabi writer. The excerpts are organized around important places from Surjit Sarna's life and her relationship with her husband, and not necessarily by chronology. They provide vignettes into daily life from that time, the impacts of Partition, and Punjabi literary life. The excerpts are preceded by a biographical introduction to Surjit Sarna's life.

**Keywords:** Punjabi literature, Partition, Lahore, Delhi, Mohinder Singh Sarna.

**Introduction**

These excerpts have been taken from a new translation of the book that my mother Surjit Sarna wrote in the months immediately following the death of my father, noted Punjabi litterateur Mohinder Singh Sarna, in January 2001. As she tells the reader "these pages do not contain a story, nor an autobiography ... only a tale of pain."

Not only did she feel her loss keenly as any human being would, she reacted to it as a poet and writer. The heavy grief, she writes "had sunk deep down into the heart ... There was a turbulence in life's waters and it seemed that the boat carrying the sorrows of the heart was being tossed around in an unknown and mighty ocean ... The memory of the seasons, the sunlight and the shade that we had both known together had always been in the breezes ...but those too had now gone their way. This is the sad song of those breezes which I now listen to, and I now relate."

In such a mood she took the pen and she let memory speak. Without much attempt at structure, giving free rein to emotion, she recalls their life journey from the days

immediately following the partition of the sub-continent to their courtship in Delhi and Kalyan, and their life together in Nangal, Delhi and Dehradun. The narrative carries all the colours, the sounds and sights, the back and forth, the remembered bits of beauty that the mind's eye captures, and recalls. In the process it reveals the writer's soul, her appreciation of emotions and sentiment and her keen perception of place. Written as prose, these passages actually reveal the poet in her. The places and the events of the times – the partition riots in Lahore, the Sindhi refugee camps of Kalyan, the building of the Bhakra dam near Nangal, the idyllic Dehradun of the sixties with its bungalows and litchi gardens ... are all brought alive by the incandescent glow of her memories.

My father's passing, a month after their fiftieth marriage anniversary, had brought to an end a deep emotional bond, a strong element of which was a shared love of literature. In fact, their marriage itself began as a literary love story, brought together as they were by their appreciation of good literature, both Punjabi and English, as well as their predilections to follow the writing life. My mother's elder sister Prabhjot Kaur and her husband Narinderpal Singh – both of whom would go on to become well-known Punjabi writers – too had then embarked on their literary journey; my father was a close friend of theirs and it was at their house that he met and fell in the love with the 17-year old Surjit, captivated by her charming simplicity, her unworldly demeanour, her early writing and her passion for books.

Surjit grew up in a large family of seven sisters and one brother. Her childhood memories are of life in large cantonment bungalows in the military dairy farms in places such as Poona, Kirkee, Jabalpur, Mhow and Kalyan. Frequent moves meant disrupted school education and the upheaval of the partition ruled out a normal journey through college; despite this unorthodox progress, she would end with a double M.A., in English and in Punjabi, besides a degree in teaching. It was also a childhood of voracious reading, both of the English classics and Hindi translations of Tagore and Sarat Chandra. Her own early poetic efforts, even as a teenager, appeared in Punjabi magazines in Lahore such as *Pritam* and *Punjabi Sahitya*, and as part of a slim volume called *Kafila*. In the fifties, her poems and plays were broadcast over Jalandhar radio. She turned to the short story too early. Her first collection *Tain Ki Dard Na Aaya* somehow reached actor-writer Balraj Sahni when he was in Kashmir in 1962. So impressed was he that he wrote her a generously worded letter in neat Gurmukhi, extolling her stories and her language and putting her in a select group of Punjabi writers. Her later short stories have been collected in *Lahore Kinni Door*; the eponymous title story is one of her most highly regarded.

Three collections of her poems *Gal Mere Ishq Di*, *Teri Meri Preet* and *Nagma Patchhar Da* were published in later years.

While continuing to write poetry and short stories, Surjit had discovered her talent for translation. Among the important English classics that she has made accessible to Punjabi readers for the Sahitya Akademi, Bhasha Vibhag Punjab and National Book Trust are *A Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins, *The Heart of Midlothian* by Walter Scott, *Word* by Jean Paul Sartre and *Fire on the Mountain* by Anita Desai. Among the Hindi classics that she translated into Punjabi are *Meri Teri Uski Baat* and *Divya* by Yashpal, *Woh Bichara* and *Muktibodh* by Jyanendra Kumar. She has also contributed several translated volumes to Sahitya Akademi's series of *Makers of Indian Literature*. She was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Puruskar for translation in 1996 for *Muktibodh* and the Punjabi Akademi award for translation 1996-97. Along with this huge amount of literary translation Surjit Sarna has been a highly sought-after commercial translator. But despite her success, she does not encourage writers to be tempted by translation projects: "It takes away your own creativity," she says.

Her success in translation took her to the radio. For twenty years, beginning in her sixties, Surjit was a regular news reader in Punjabi for All India Radio, often translating the English copy into Punjabi minutes before going live on the air. These years are memorable for her for the last-minute tension and excitement that news can carry and for the companionship and friendships of the news room with colleagues handling other Indian languages. Her passion for current events, her daily devouring of the newspaper and television bulletins- which continues to this day- had been adequate preparation for her work for the radio.

Only a word at the end: hers has not been a secluded and privileged writer's life; her literary work has been done in the midst of demanding family responsibilities and extraordinary constraints. In my view, that makes it all the more valuable.

**Separation Without End, by Surjit Sarna: Excerpts**

*Lahore*

I will talk of those dark days when the earth shook not just under my feet, or of those close to me but of all our fellow Indians –young and old, man or woman. Our secure and carefree existence was suddenly engulfed in chaos, shaken to the core as only happens but rarely in human existence. Everything came apart at the seams, in those ill-starred days and terrifying nights. History will never forgive; the memory of those days will forever scar humanity's beautiful face.

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In college, whatever free time I got was spent in the library, leafing through books. In December 1946 when the examination ended, I issued several books from the library and took them home for the vacations. It was a cold winter: sunny days alternated with short, overcast dark days, which seemed to crouch in the cold, frozen and shivering. We would put the brazier in the room, or put on the heater. Beji, our grandmother, would finish her chores and come and lie down. And I would be lost in reading those novels I had issued, including many of Alexander Dumas, lost in the carefree indolence of youth.

Literature already had me in her grip. Even as a class X student in 1945 my poems had been carried by magazines such as *Pritam* and *Punjabi Sahitya*. We would also enact plays in school inspired by our teacher Prof Harcharan Singh, himself a well-known dramatist whose plays "*Kedhan de din char*" and "*Anjosh*" were being staged in town.

My love of poetry was no secret: my friends Kanwaljit, Baljit, Jasjit, Birinder and Phool Khera all knew it. Of these friends, I only met Birinder and Phool after partition; I have no idea where the others went. We would eat our lunch during the break on the sprawling back lawns of the college. Just outside the back gate, an old man sold *chaat* of boiled sweet potatoes with sweet and sour sauce, which we bought almost every day to add to our shared lunch. The parathas made by Beji in my lunch box were always a hit and I would hardly get any. I would make up on reaching home, around four in the afternoon.

It was not always possible to take the college bus as its few seats were usually taken. The local buses, all belonging to one company - the Nanda Bus Service - were few and far between. On reaching home, Beji would give me hot parathas with tea and her mango pickle, into which she would have thrown long green chilies.

How different life was then, how simple.

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But all that vanished in the blink of an eye.

One morning Beji returned from the gurudwara with some pamphlets. She asked us to make as many copies as we could. She herself was not sure of the purpose but it was surmised that the gurudwara wanted to distribute them to as many households as possible. We learnt then of the riots in the villages of Pothohar and how women had jumped into wells to escape being dishonored at the hands of the rioters. Those who fell into the hands of the rioters were abducted as village after village was attacked, looted and set aflame. The attackers had killed and murdered and destroyed, and moved on.

Tensions were rising in Lahore too. Slogans began to appear on walls: "We will play Holi with blood." Pakistan had not yet been formed; only the negotiations between leaders were going on. Perhaps even they had no idea about the possible impact of their decisions on the common man. Citizen committees formed in each locality and patrolled the lanes to keep the peace.

For us too things changed very suddenly in view of the rising danger. A couple of us did try to go to college and reached there with considerable difficulty. The place was deserted. The exams had been postponed without any fresh dates being set. A few students could be seen in the deserted hostel, or in the library and they too were keenly aware of the danger of being there. The old man was still selling his *chaat* but that day it had lost its taste. Our childhood, our innocence had vanished somewhere and we had suddenly grown up. What had happened to my beloved Lahore, the Lahore of my childhood, my birthplace... it was now a worried, scared, cowering city.

We went to sleep wearing black, with kirpans at our side. Incidents of knifing and arson had started in Lahore and curfew had been imposed. When reports of some

major incident spread through the bazaars, people would huddle together. The children would cry and their mothers would scold them. "Then why have you locked us up?" some child would ask. There would be sudden nervous laughter and the tension would break.

As the days passed, people- including us- still felt that nothing much would change even if Lahore went to Pakistan. Rulers changed, we said, not populations. Then in those dangerous days my mother suddenly turned up to check on us. I don't know how our father allowed her to travel alone; perhaps one could not fathom the degree of the danger sitting afar. When she alighted at the station there were only a few tongas waiting and not one was ready to take her to our place in Dharampura. On the way they would have to pass through the Muslim locality of Shahu di Garhi and would surely be stopped for carrying a Sikh passenger. At last, one *tonga-wallah* took pity on her but when he reached our area, a crowd surrounded the tonga.

Seeing the crowd on the road, our brother Jeet also reached there and was astounded to see our mother at the center of the crowd. But we knew she was not one to be afraid. She had lived among the Pathans for many years as a young woman in the North West Frontier, in Bannu, Peshawar and Tonk. An incident of my childhood comes to mind. Once in Bannu we were returning from somewhere, probably from a shopping trip, in a tonga. There were three of us with her and there was Aunt Karishma, the store-keeper's wife and adapted sister of my mother. I recall still the long, deserted road lined on both sides by tall trees. My mother had noticed that the tonga-wallah was deliberately taking a wrong route and to let him know that she knew, she started talking about the roads to Aunt Karishma. But he took no heed and carried on. They told him to stop the tonga, but he only increased the speed. If we tried to get up, he would bar our way with his whip. Then my mother stood up in the speeding tonga and slapped him tightly across the face. The Pathan was stunned into submission. We walked home.

The incident worried my father greatly. He said that Pathans always exact revenge; they would kidnap the children for ransom. In fact, a child had earlier been kidnapped from our Military Dairy Farm but when it contracted smallpox, they wrapped it up and left it behind the house. For many days we had to remain locked up at home.

Bannu was a walled city; its gates would be shut at night. There was some arrangement between the British and the Pathans under which the British paid them

off regularly to keep them away from kidnappings and other misadventures but their very presence instilled fear among children. Many years later when we were in Kirkee and Poona, we would see them, dressed in their long *kurtas* and Peshawari *salwars*. My younger sister Tripti was particularly scared of them and would run into the house if she saw one approaching. They would frequent the market in Poona and could be seen lining up outside the gates of the Kirkee Ordnance factory on pay day to recoup the money that the workers had taken from them on credit.

So that day at the height of the tensions surrounding the riots, our mother reached Lahore alone. Beji blessed the trembling *tonga-wallah* and gave him a hundred rupees – a very large sum those days. Two or three men, including our brother, then escorted him back till Shahu di Garhi.

Tensions continued to rise and the situation went from bad to worse. Satanic forces were afoot, using common folk to meet their nefarious objectives. From our roof we could see spirals of smoke rising into the sky. People began to leave the city – the trains were still running.

New rumors about Lahore's fate were born every morning. Lahore was the beautiful, fashionable, throbbing center of Punjab, the home of its literature and culture, just as Amritsar was the keeper of the Harmandir Sahib and the heart of the Sikhs. A strange restlessness, a fear and unspoken terror cast their shadows over everything. Our blameless, innocent hearts were haunted by the prospect of losing something valuable. Anything could have happened but what did happen could not have been anticipated at all.

The day we left our home, there were fires everywhere. The flames around Shah Mali could be seen from a distance. People were now frantic to leave. We too hurried to depart because no one knew what the morrow would bring. Beji did not have even the time to change her dupatta. All her starched dupattas, edged with lace, were left in the trunks there. Everything in the house was left where it was, as if our return was only a matter of time. We did lock the house, but those locks would not be opened by us. Now I feel that the house must have been occupied as soon as we left.

Lahore that day was a strange, unknown city. Somewhere, lost in its lanes, were our smiles and our laughter. Many other families were also heading to the station, convinced that staying on was no longer an option. We had no tickets, but we

crowded into a carriage of the Punjab Mail for what would be our last journey from that land. We would never return.

Our Mother India was divided. With such a sharp blade that the blood still seeps from her body. We had lost the battle – the freedom that we had got was no beautiful bird but a bleeding creature with clipped wings; it would not be able to fly for very long.

Lahore was burning; Delhi was preparing to celebrate, to light candles. Punjab's peace was at an end; the long caravans of loaded bullock carts were on the move. This land of five rivers, this prosperous and fertile land, this land of sweet music, of brave warriors, martyrs and lovers would now be awash in blood. No songs would be heard; only shrieks, screams and wails.

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### *Delhi*

I had just about entered the hostel, not even settled down properly.

It was the beginning of April. Then even the early mornings of April had a touch of winter. It was a Sunday, or perhaps some festival. I seem to recall that it was *amavasya*. Someone told me that day that the people of Delhi go to bathe in the Yamuna on that day and indeed I did see people heading in the direction of the river.

I can never forget that day. Those moments are inscribed on my heart and soul. Those moments, that time, that day, that season, the weather... That was the moment in my life when you were to meet me. Time must have been waiting for us at that turn, some eternal destiny too.

That day you and Narinder Virji had been cycling around the streets of Delhi and chatting. And while cycling you had had come towards my hostel to see me. You wrote to me about that day later –

*Many a summer had sighed past my window and I heeded them not. Until you came and stood in that shady nook of my little garden; and the silent shadows grew plaintive with your presence.*

*The shy drooping gaze of your dark eyes made the buds flush into a passion of colour and smell; the congregation of leaves clapped its hands and shouted in a madness of mirth.*

*The tripping breezes knocked at my door so gentle, yet so violent, that coming out I looked at my little garden and stood in a silent, sweet amazement.*

I had just washed my hair and come downstairs. I don't remember what I was wearing, but I remember the crepe dupatta that I had draped around my shoulders. Suddenly I saw Narinder Virji coming towards me with someone else. The date of his wedding with my sister Prabhjot had been fixed and he was now posted in Delhi. Gesturing towards you he said –

“This is Mohinder Singh Sarna....my friend.”

I glanced at you, but didn't say anything. We had already greeted each other with Sat Sri Akal. I didn't feel any more curiosity towards you at that moment. I had already read your short stories in *Punjabi Sahitya*. You were wearing a light mauve turban. I didn't know either of you well enough to have a conversation. Virji was telling me to come to his wedding. You also added: “You too must come to Poona for the wedding.” That was all you said, and for the rest sat silently.

About my going I would decide later after talking to my eldest sister. I had just come from Poona and it seemed difficult to go back so quickly. I had an exam coming up and still had no idea of everything that I had to study.

It is said that for meeting some particular person there is a special moment that gets inscribed on the two souls, perhaps for eternity. Even time holds its breath then. There was surely some unspoken old bond, some deep communication between our souls. Else how could we two strangers have come so close to each other and become partners for eternity. But that day I had no idea of all this. You too had read my poems in *Pritam* and *Punjabi Sahitya*. They had been published before your short stories. Perhaps we exchanged some cursory remarks about these stories and poems. That was all. You two writers had come to meet me. For me it was a very strange experience.

Nothing much happened that day, nor did we even talk a lot. But our destinies would have been decided that day for all time to come. Of that momentary meeting you had once written to me –

*You are so full of secrets, this I have already written to you in my last year. That you are different also everyone knows. Do open your treasure of secrets in front of me some day, acquaint with me with all the scents of your fragrant heart. What all do you think about, what all do you feel, why do you keep so much locked up within you?*

*That you are different had become clear to me when one day your eyes filled up with tears for no reason at all. Narinder tried to make you feel better and I got up and left the room. Before that you had glanced into my eyes for a brief moment. A brief glance that seemed to come from very near me. But that was just a coincidence: your tears had nothing to do with me. You were crying because you couldn't go for Prabhjot's wedding.*

*But how was I to blame for that... I too had tried several times to convince you to go for the wedding then when with your open hair you had come sailing like some ship into the YWCA hostel...what a unique girl, I had thought, how different. (4 September 1949)*

You had written and sent me a poem in English ... how many poems, in Punjabi and in English, you used to send. Now when I read them, I can only weep and wonder how someone can love another so much and then depart for another world. I feel you within me. The memory of that day you had sent thus –

*It was an early April morn when her pale, lovely face,  
Fresh after the morning bath, like a dew dripping  
Lily found its repose in the  
Sunshine of my soul  
And her loose wet hair streamed  
Through my being like the fragrant  
Breath of a dark summer night.  
A glance from her dark eyes made  
The sordid dust of my heart blossom  
Into the flowers of a countless spring.  
And the music of her voice  
Touched my harp with its mellow sweetness and  
Gave a meaning to the songs in the air.*

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Once when we reached Delhi, winter was at its peak. We broke journey to meet our sisters after a gap of six or seven months. Narinder Virji had already written ahead to you of my arrival and we met again there, at sister Prabhjot's house. You looked at me as if I was a stranger – perhaps, I thought, you had forgotten everything.

Memories can make us helpless. As I write these words now, my entire being seems to be crumbling away....

You too recalled that meeting often: *“That last evening of last December. Those khadi clothes and white sandals became you so much. You looked like some political leader. I asked myself – who is this girl? She does seem familiar. Is there some bond between us or is this just some illusion of my heart? Those eyes – did they really glance towards me? And what is this churning in my heart? Finally, she has come to sit close to me. She is smiling at me. That smile, that smile I know. It has washed away every doubt, every quibble. Those eyes look deep into my heart and then don't stop looking. That young girl of wise demeanour and simple clothes standing next to the staircase is asking how I am.”*

Those beautiful days, we would recall them often. Then a separation of a few days or months seemed so long. And now more than a year has passed since we met. How long is this separation? Eons long, and there is no hope of it ending.

A long time ago you had promised me: *“Yes, my life, we will be like this forever for each other. On this path of life, our hands clasped, our eyes locked. Partners in life's joys and in life's sorrows. Supporting each other with our love always. We should live like this forever, finding God in each other, worshipping each other. (February 1951)*

Now the winter is passing and where do I go without you, where does one go alone? It is the season of sweet peas. We both loved their fragrance. Now flowers and fragrances do not matter. I search for you instead in the fragrances of my spirit. Your passing has taken with it all life's beauty, all fragrance, all hope. Only a sad emptiness remains.

We did not meet often those days, but the hope of meeting was always with us. We passed our days in an intoxicated headiness. The spirit became addicted to love and

the eyes to daydreaming. If only one could pass one's entire life like that. I used to think – a heart that is filled with the sharp sweet ache of love is so rich.

The evenings would bring us together; the twilight would separate us. Our shared heartbeats, our clasped hands stayed with us even when we parted. Your words would linger on my lips, my thoughts would churn in your mind.

You wrote to me of those days: *“The night with its headload of dreams would sprinkle gold dust in our sleep. You would become the light of your smiles and slip away from my trembling hands.”*

Yes, memories nurtured us, our meetings would drive us crazy and the waiting drained us. We were no longer the beings we had been – we had changed beyond recognition. One day we went to see the film ‘*Apna Desh*’ but that day I left for home just as we came out of the cinema. You had wanted to say something, but you stayed silent.

One day you reminded me of this incident in a letter –

*We stepped into the cinema as soon as we met. There too you sat so distant, so far away. And with good fortune you found a bus leaving for Karol Bagh on coming out. Why would you stay with me? Maybe there will be no more buses after that. I said let us walk on this long road. We won't meet many people here and in the shadows of this soft sunshine we will reach Gole Market, walking close to each other. But as if you cared, as if you loved anyone!*

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And that day, you remember? What a beautiful day, with so many clouds floating in the sky. I don't know where those clouds came from that day. We were going to Talkatora Gardens from Karol Bagh via Shanker Road. You had a bicycle and you would take it right to the middle of the road and I would pull it back to the side. We were discussing Hobbes and Hegel. That was some strange day. We were walking on that road in some intoxication. Only an occasional passerby was to be seen on that road. You immortalized the memory of that road in a letter –

*Then that road where you taught me civic sense and that man, bereft of any civic sense, who kept going into the middle of the road. That day I felt that we had*

*reached another world. You were looking more and more different to me. I would stop again and again as if to ask you, who are you, where are you taking me, this limitless emotion that is overflowing from your eyes...why does the breeze kiss the curls that fall onto your face, how have the sun's rays melted into your smile.*

Then that road ended. How surprised were we that it had ended! Everything seemed so so strange...do roads ever come to an end? But it had. I said – “It is getting very late, and dark.” You were silent and I hailed a tonga and went home, leaving you standing and staring after me.

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The rose nursery in Talkatora Gardens pulled us towards itself. Roses were the witnesses to our love. Our love too bloomed like those flowers. We had been to that nursery a year earlier too, in the winter. On that sunny afternoon we had sat and talked like strangers, distant and formal. I know you remember each day as well as I do.

Those days the whispers of our love could be heard in the breeze. It seemed even the flowers bent towards each other to talk of our love. Were there any others who loved like us? Those who did not love – how did they survive? The sweetest and the most bitter experience of life, that is love. Bitter when it is not returned, but when it is, it becomes a blessing and all else pales before it.

People do exist without love and live listless lives that are never fulfilled, that never rise above the ordinary. It is love that can touch our existence of flesh and blood with a heavenly light.

*You wrote to me: “For your love, I am forever in your debt. Your love has given us the gift of life. Your touch has carved out the fortune line on my palm. Your beautiful presence has introduced me to those golden moments of life when time vanishes and the spirit loses itself into a lighted, heavenly and melodious vastness. I am forever in your debt.”*

Then I left for Kalyan and couldn't even say goodbye. I had waited and waited but could not meet you before my departure. We kept missing each other....and then I left.

***Kalyan***

Your letter arrived.

*I was looking forward to meeting you yesterday. I had thought that I would sit long with you and make up for all the missing. But when I reached Prabhjot's home, I found out that you had waited and waited and then left. You are right: the line of my fortune is indeed very dim.*

*This morning you left for Kalyan. When will you meet me again? Go on say...but then you don't know anything at all.*

Your letter filled my days. Love is such an invaluable and beautiful gift. If you know that someone loves you, your entire being changes and everything looks so wonderful and charming. One falls in love with oneself. I had gone so often to Prabhjot's home expecting to see you but no chord had resonated in your heart. Then you wrote –

*Today is the 23<sup>rd</sup> of July. Narinder told me you have really gone away to Kalyan. I was waiting for this day so long and then when I came...well, each to his own luck ... so you left without telling me. Does this ever happen! Does anybody do this! I know how much you truly care for me!*

*The clouds have lifted today. The sun is out. Let's go out today. Far away, as far as you will take me. See the clouds are gathering again on seeing you. It seems we will get nicely drenched today. But where!*

*You are sitting in Kalyan; this is all only my imagination. Yet I am not alone. Your warmth envelops me and I can feel your breath around me.*

...And I too did not feel alone. Now I do, but then there was the expectation of meeting you, your words would resound in my ear, your smile would flower on my lips.

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The days in Kalyan were among the most beautiful and carefree days of my life. Kalyan was an important suburb of Bombay, a major army transit camp before partition, first for the British troops and then for troops leaving for Pakistan. When

we reached there for our second stay, at the Military Dairy Farm, Kalyan had become a camp for refugees from Sind, who arrived each day in trucks loaded with their luggage.

The Military Dairy Farm, in which our father was posted, was away from town. Our bungalow was on a hill top, with the staff quarters tucked into its side. The farm's estate, with its cattle yard and green fields, stretched away to the right. All around were small hillocks, green slopes and dips. It was a little hill station, always cooler than Bombay.

The bungalow had a verandah on all sides and a long corridor stretched to the kitchen and pantry at the back; the long monsoons made it necessary that all these spaces were covered. An open courtyard looked down on the refugee camp and in the evening we would sit on its wall and watch the activity below. The refugees had arrived in droves and set up home in the army barracks. The more well-to-do refugees from Karachi and Hyderabad had already settled in Bombay and even started businesses. The fact was that they had not come empty handed, like the refugees from Punjab. They had come with their luggage, their jewellery and their cash.

Suburbs like Kalyan became home to those from the small towns and villages of Sind. The camp grew rapidly in size. Wooden shacks came up on both sides of the long empty roads and all manner of shops started. Just below our bungalow was Camp number 1. A thin road twisted lazily and reluctantly from it down the hill to Camp number 3. Beyond that was the ancient temple of Ambar Nath and the highway to Bombay.

I had earlier seen refugee camps in Pimpri and in Delhi. I had also seen fires in Lahore, heard people crying and wailing for lost ones. But life makes every effort to live on. It does not lose hope even on blood-drenched paths. Weddings and celebrations take place in refugee camps, children are born and felicitations exchanged. At the same time, in every breath there is the abiding memory of those who have been separated. This is life...Life! You are marvellous, I salute you. Your ways are amazing.

The shops in the camps flourished. Clothes, shoes, decorative items and things of daily need were sold and bought. It would not have been possible to believe that such activity would start in a matter of days. The biggest bazaar was in Camp

number 3. That was the place to visit in the evenings, full of shops of fabric, embroidery, jewelry, tailoring and sweets. The people of Sind are hardworking and do not shy away from any sort of business.

One needs everything to go on living. One needs jobs and work. And for that it was necessary to go to Bombay from Kalyan. In a few months, buses began to ply to take people to the railway station from where the local trains would take them to Bombay. Everyone was trying to find a new life, not just there but in the entire country. Those who had never lifted their hand even in their dreams to do any work were willing to try anything. Lakhs had been rendered homeless. Family ties were being formed all over again. There were strangers who became family while some family members turned away their faces.

But even now there were some who sat lost and defeated, not letting their wounds heal, constantly mourning those left behind. But people also found time to visit each other, to extend support and listen to each other's woes.

This was our growing up. We were witnessing and understanding much that we would never have experienced if the country had not been divided.

We had no friends in the Dairy Farm. The families whom we had known in our previous stay had been posted out. But we were four sisters – the other three were married - and we were very close to each other. One evening we stepped out into the refugee camp and were astounded at the change that had overcome the once quiet military area. A veritable new town had come up before our eyes. On our way back we saw four girls standing near a big hall on the same hill as our bungalow. A large family of three sisters and their children lived in that big hall. We exchanged smiles and soon began to visit each other. Without knowing who they were and where they had come from, a friendship began that was to last a lifetime.

Just inside the entrance of the hall stood two big sewing machines with foot pedals. Two of our new friends, Savitri and Kamla, would stitch clothes for hours at a time on those machines, while the younger girls helped with the housework. The family had brought the machines along with them from Sind; those machines were their livelihood. I would go to them to learn stitching, and my sisters would soon follow. But that was just an excuse to sit and chat. Come evening, they would get up from their machines, get ready and step out with us. After a round of the bazaar we would

bring them home for tea and an evening of gossip and chatter. Then we would go to leave them home. This was the pattern of our lives.

\*

But those days in Kalyan...those innocent days ... young new days filled with the wealth of your love. That was the town of my love, my dreams whose memory has locked step with me through all these years.

You were also fond of Kalyan, very fond. You wrote to me:

*“5<sup>th</sup> of December 1950, we reached Kalyan in the late afternoon. We were welcomed by smiling sunshine and open fresh breezes. So this was the pretty place where my beloved lived. Everything about the place appealed to me. That open landscape stretching to the horizon, those hillocks and ravines and dips, those slopes covered with golden dry grass. It all seemed familiar, a bit like Rawalpindi where I was born and where I grew up. My beloved’s home was a neighbour of my childhood home. It seemed to me that this girl who was to be my bride was a friend from my childhood. Those breezes, those hills nodded in agreement. That welcoming late afternoon and its beauty are unforgettable. I had become part of those surroundings. There was a new warmth in my limbs, the freshness of a new life. The wonder of it all made me feel that I was floating along on the shoulders of my two brothers.”*

Yes, that was the 5<sup>th</sup> of December 1950, the day before our wedding. That day is etched in my memory too. There weren’t too many guests at home, only my elder sisters had come with their young children. My friend Jasbir too had come. I didn’t have much of an idea about what was happening. It hadn’t sunk in that I would have to leave Kalyan and that the separation would drain me. It was a new turn in my life and even if one desires one cannot go back on life’s paths again. As we move forward, the paths we have traversed close behind us, only their memory remains in our hearts. These trails are never seen again except in the world of our memories. But nobody stops us from visiting that world. The heart, free as a bird, can reach there any time, from any place.

### *Nangal*

Bhakra Nangal, a unique place. A new township coming up for the builders of Bhakra Nangal dam. A magical town, a little pearl of nature.

5 Circular Avenue was a lovely bungalow with its lawns, vegetable beds and flowers. The drawing room led to a verandah in front of which was a circular bed of roses. All kinds of roses, those roses – the witness to our love, were here too. And on the side of the bungalow, the rooms opened out on to a long verandah. A very pretty house. The gate was at end of a long drive. Beyond it, at the centre of a crossing, stood an ancient peepal tree with its thick shade. A cemented circular platform had been constructed around its huge trunk. Many roads let out from this crossing: one towards the club, one to the old Nangal town, another to the offices and yet another on which our house stood. Under this tree the workers would gather for their union meetings. Here slogans were raised: “*Jo ham se takraiye ga, choor choor ho jayega.*” Flowering trees lined those roads, those new roads...everything was so new.

The duties at the dam were in shifts that ran around the clock. One train left with the workers at midnight for the graveyard shift. We would walk in our lawn and look at each flower, each leaf. Not far from the house was the Sutlej river; there a couple of boatmen were always around to take you on the water.

You would leave for office and Navtej and I would go for walks. Sometimes down to the river, at other times to the club or to the market. Or around the huge ground where the Basant fair would be set up. After Lahore this was my second opportunity to live in Punjab; earlier I had stayed in Jalandhar.

This was a different sort of Punjab. This land I felt had been blessed by the touch of Guru Gobind Singh himself. His presence could be felt everywhere. A sacred land. Often, I would set off alone on those deserted roads and go to the Gurudwara Ghaat Sahib on the Sutlej bank. The flowing waters gave me peace. On the opposite bank, across the river atop a hill was the Gurudwara Bhambor Sahib where Guru Gobind Singh had meditated and written the Chaupai sahib. You would recite the Chaupai every evening, from beginning to end..so much so that even little Navtej had memorized parts of it.

Not far from home was the Gole Market. Just a few fashionable shops in a sort of circle. There was a New Empire Store which sold all sorts of things, even food items. Even wool. I was very fond of knitting and would often buy wool from there for sweaters. That shop also sold magazines from England and those days they were not expensive. I would buy my copy of *Women's Own* every month, perhaps for a rupee. Even the Main Market wasn't far away, easily reached by rickshaw. Not that it was much of a market, just a string of shops on either side of a clearing. Whenever family members visited us from Delhi, they would be taken to this market and then down to the river for a boat ride on the Sutlej.

Movies were shown at the club every weekend. We saw Shammi Kapoor's "Tum sa Nahin Dekha" there. One would run into people at the club but I didn't really make any friends. Once in a while I would chat with our neighbour, the wife of Engineer Agarwal. Her two sons were older than Navtej but they would play together. On the other side of the bungalow was only a guest house where officers would come and stay a day or two.

In this town of dreams, I heard little footsteps...someone was coming, someone with messages of happiness for my life, to make even stronger the bonds with this earthly life...my daughter Jaskiran. The day she was born there was a mighty storm and electricity failed at the hospital. It had snowed in Simla. They said it had snowed that early in Simla after a hundred years.

### *Dehradun*

It was evening by the time we reached Dehradun for the first time. The rain had just stopped and the hills looked fresh and clean. The open surroundings of Race Course had a washed look. The gravel that covered the front yard of our house sparkled. It was the beginning of August, in fact the second of August, 1965. You had come earlier and rented the house. We had followed by bus. It was said that people did not survive long in the post of Director Finance in ONGC. Yours was a very responsible job; decisions involving crores of rupees were taken in a matter of minutes.

Dehradun has changed a lot. In those days there were no crowds and life moved at a slow, tranquil pace leaving enough time for many things. The rains would come...the dark clouds would gather over Dehradun's skies and then burst upon

the valley. Those were some clouds, some showers. Everything would turn green and soothing to the eye.

That open expansive feel of Race Course is still intact. The Mussoorie hills greet you with a smile from every point, right to the distinctive summit of Gun Hill. After the rains came the days of Dussehra and the Ramlila would be staged at several places. The days became shorter, the sunlight deepened its colour, the breezes became cooler. The whispers of the coming winter travelled from the distant hills. I was happy. Your presence made everything beautiful. God had been kind – your love, my love, our love and those golden days. A simple life, made up of everyday things, ordinary events that held our interest and charmed our hearts. The Ramlila was one such.... One day in the bazaar it seemed that a wedding was underway, such was the atmosphere. Someone mentioned that the wedding procession of Sri Ramchandrajai was coming. We watched an open jeep travel slowly through the bazaar. Ramchandrajai and Lakshman were seated in it, with several others at their feet. A brass band played ahead of the jeep and whenever the jeep halted several people would break into a dance before it. The festival mood was at its height.

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A few weeks after we reached Dehradun, the war with Pakistan broke out. It was a time for worry and concern – everyone had someone in the army. Our spirits would rise whenever good news came from the front. Children would enthusiastically greet passing soldiers with salutes and cheers. There would be a “black-out” every night. If any light was seen in any house, the neighbours would shout and have it blocked. When the war ended, and despite the victories over the enemy’s Patton tanks, a pall of mourning descended upon Dehradun. Young Army officers were returning, many without a leg or an arm. Many did not return, and their parents were grieving. Wars always end in wailing. Mothers, sisters, wives, children are left to grieve, to spend their lives coming to terms with the loss. On the Dussehra after the war we were invited to the Gorkha Training Centre for the celebrations. But the sight of the injured officers saddened us and we did not stay long. Even the territory that had been captured by our Army was returned. Then why lose precious lives, shed so much blood?

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We explored every part of the valley – Sahastardhara, Raipur, Paltan Bazaar, Rajpur and Rajpur Road, and all the way to Mussoorie. Each day was valuable. The sun would linger all afternoon on our front verandah and I would settle down there with my knitting after sending you to office post lunch. One by one the neighborhood ladies would join me. I cannot now remember what we gossiped about- some movie or the film stars or the children. But we were happy – everything happened on that verandah. That was our club and that was our kitty party. The mustard leaves would be chopped there for the *sarson ka saag*, knitting patterns learnt and taught, the children tested on their spelling, recipes of chutneys and pickles exchanged...and the day would pass. I wonder now how did the house run...who did all the housework...

Often, I would tuck in the children and wait for your return from office at the gate. The cold wind would hit me straight in the face and give me a headache. But I would prefer to stay outside till you returned. Those days your meetings in office often went on till very late.

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When the *gurpurab* came the entire town would descend upon the gurudwara in Race Course. Piles of vegetables would arrive two days earlier and the preparations for the langar would begin and all of us would pitch in whole heartedly. On *gurpurab*, the Sukhmani recitation would begin at four in the morning. That would be the best time. Peaceful, transcendental music, the early morning cold. I would close my eyes and be transported. It was an ethereal experience that would send waves of bliss through my being. The kirtan and discourses would continue all day along with the serving of langar. The evening would see several people going for tea and some rest to the homes of their friends in Race Course – these visits would have been all tied up in advance. The night session at the Gurudwara would be somewhat less crowded, and there would be the expectant build up to the Kavi Darbar at midnight. The children would sleep off there itself.

Those were very nice days and beautiful nights, redolent with moonlight and flowers. Those days were birds on a tree and were flying away one by one, slipping away from my hands, to vanish in unknown skies.

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Who would have guessed that we would ever return to Dehradun? One morning in Delhi the thought crossed my mind ... it would be so nice if we could go back somehow. But why would you be transferred back on deputation to ONGC again? There would be others in line ... I dismissed the thought from my mind. Two hours later you called to say that we were going back to Dehradun, to head a new office of your own department, the Audit department. I saw it as a miracle that had fulfilled my innermost wish. Another stay in Dehradun was beyond my dreams and now it had become a reality. I wanted to live each day to the full. Your presence shed light on those days, made them beautiful, full of life. The memories come flooding back ...

Living in Dallahwala, we were surrounded by greenery. The gardener in our bungalow on Balbir Road was given the main task of planting flowers. He did a wonderful job, filling the garden with flowers of all kinds. Roses and chrysanthemums would flower in winter. We would take bouquets of chrysanthemums to the gurudwara on *gurpurab*. The bed of sweet peas was just beyond the window of the drawing room and the room would always be redolent with their fragrance.

When the summer arrived, a not too harsh summer, the mango and litchi trees would begin to fruit. There were litchi gardens close to our home which would be contracted out before the season began. The men keeping watch over the fruit would beat tin drums at regular intervals to keep the birds away and when the litchis were ripe, they would begin to pack them in cases in the gardens. We too would buy the freshly picked litchi from these gardens. Our bungalow had two litchi trees and their fruit would be devoured by us straight from the branch. When the mangoes ripened, the *koels* would sing, often all night. The song of the *koel* would plunge me into sadness, bring tears unbidden to me eye, drive away my sleep. I don't know why.

The same sadness would envelop me in the afternoons which were lazy, steeped in silence, devoid of life and color. Those afternoons would push me into a swirl of hopelessness. The daily call of a man selling chopped sugarcane would deepen this feeling; that call signified that the day was soon coming to an end. If I took my bicycle and headed to meet my old friends in Race Course, the empty yawning verandahs of the bungalows on the street would sink my heart. I felt then that everything in life was about to end ... I cannot explain that feeling too.

But the mornings ... When I would open the door in the morning I would see the washed blue mountains before me. The open surroundings would make me want to sing, raise my arms and sing the praises of that Supreme power that had made such a beautiful world. Happiness would overcome my heart without any reason at all...that was the magic of Dehradun, the magic that slowly intoxicated one. But all that was beautiful, lovable, charming and warm because you were warm...because your love was limitless ... just your loving glance would fill my being with a new light.

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### *Delhi*

The night deepens and I open my eyes, moist with tears.... I cannot see you anywhere ... you are not visible at all. We don't know who is the winner or the loser in this game of Time. I feel I am the one who lost because without you I am very alone.

We were so happy those days in Kalyan. When we went together to Bombay ... it was so nice. We sat near the Gateway of India staring at the vast ocean. The waves crashed repeatedly against the shore. The we went for a ride on the water on a motor boat and a cool breeze caressed us. Life was carefree and those moments were all our own. I cannot ever forget that motor boat ride ... that day we had truly set sail on the unending ocean. Like we had then set sail together on the vast ocean of life.

Casting aside the world and the binding ties of its rituals and traditions, two travellers had started on a journey... then we did not know the destination...only that our love too, like that ocean, was deep, unending, vast.

Those moments passed, as did that day, and so many years of life also merged into eternity.

The seasons change ... the beautiful time comes, the time of going to Talkatora Gardens. To sit in the dappled sunshine and go through our memories refresh them. Talkatora is the biggest witness of our love, our dearest companion. I am taking care of these memories...they were dear to you ... they shouldn't be allowed to crumble away, get lost somewhere. When you shifted to Lodi Road, you were

troubled that Talkatora was now far away. Connaught Place and Gole Market had become distant too ... Now I feel everything is far away.

You wrote to me once, when I left for Kalyan:

*I recall often that day when I lay my head in your lap. A crazy thought is again rising in my mind, that I should lay my head again in your lap ... will you let me! Lost in memories, I miss you. I hadn't even looked at you to my heart's content, fulfilled my yearnings but these yearnings will not go even if I look at you all my life ... and you went away. Does anybody behave like this ... is this any way of doing things!*

I say the same things to you today. Listen to me. You have not gone anywhere but I want to see you in front of me...smile and squeeze my hand, hold me and say, "Don't worry. This rain will not last forever, my bride."

But today I don't believe your words. This parting will not end. My fingers yearn for the touch of your hand ... they tremble. The remaining days of my life, how so ever many they be, will have to be spent alone. You had never said anything about leaving someone mid -stream like this ...

ends

*Translator's note: The chosen excerpts have been, unlike in the book, structured under the names of five places. This liberty has been taken to allow the reader to appreciate the author's keen perception of place in the context of her own emotions and memories.*

### **Writings and Translations by Surjit Sarna**

#### **Writings:**

*Kafila* – a poetic story with Prabhjot Kaur and Narendrapal Singh in 1947, published by Punjabi Society, Lahore

*Tain Ki Dard Na Aaya* – short story collection, Punjabi publishers Jalandhar, first ed. 1958, second ed. 1960

*Gal Mere Ishq Di* – poetry collection 1988, Arsee publishers

*Teri Meri Preet* – poetry collection 1990, Arsee publishers

*Lahore Kinni Door* – short story collection 1997, Arsee

*Nagma Patchhar Da* – poetry collection 1999, Arsee

**Translations:**

*A Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins 1980, 1994 for Bhasha Vibhag Punjab

*The Heart of Midlothian* by Walter Scott, 1995 for Bhasha Vibhag Punjab

*Raja Ram Mohan Roy* by Somendranath Tagore for Sahitya Akademi – in series of Makers of Indian Literature (1985)

*Kabir* by Prabhakar Machwe for Sahitya Akademi – in series of Makers of Indian Literature (1985)

*Guru Nanak* by G.S.Talib (1987) for Sahitya Akademi – in series of Makers of Indian Literature (1985)

*Word* by Jean Paul Sartre (1992) for Sahitya Akademi

*History of Marathi Literature* (1990) Kusumavati and S.V.Rajyadhaksa, for Sahitya Akademi

*Fire on the Mountain* by Anita Desai (1998) for Sahitya Akademi

*The Immigrant* by Stephen Gill (1992)

*Escape* by John Galsworthy (1998) Bhasha Vibhag Punjab

*Meri Teri Uski Baat* by Yashpal (1989) for Sahitya Akademi

*Woh Bichara* by Jyanendra Kumar (1992) for National Book Trust

*Muktibodh* by Jyanendra Kumar (1995) for Sahitya Akademi

*Modern Indian Short Stories 2003*, ed. Shiv K. Kumar for Sahitya Akademi

*Divya* by Yashpal (2013), for Sahitya Akademi

**Awards:**

Sahitya Akademi Puruskar for translation of *Muktibodh* in 1996

Punjabi Akademi, Delhi award for translation 1996-97

Punjabi Akademi, Delhi award for *Vichode Ban Gaye Sadiyan*