

Translation

Veena Verma*

Room Mate<https://doi.org/10.33063/os.v75.1221>

A note about the author: 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 Khatri 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. 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 Jatt rural sentiments of Budhlada from which she comes. However, her stories also reflect her own subject positionality in the UK-based Punjabi diaspora.

A note about the translator: C. Christine Fair is a professor in Georgetown University's Security Studies Program within the School of Foreign Service, where I study political and military policy issues in South Asia. My books include *The Literature of Lashkar-e-Tayyaba: Deadly Lines of Control*, co-authored with Safina Ustad (Oxford University Press, 2023); *In Their Own Words: Understanding the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba* (OUP 2019); *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War* (OUP, 2014); and *Cuisines of the Axis of Evil and Other Irritating States* (Globe Pequot, 2008). I have published creative pieces in *Vox Populi*, *The Bark*, *The Dime Show Review*, *Furious Gazelle*, *Hypertext*, *Lunch Ticket*, *Clementine Unbound*, *Fifty Word Stories*, *The Drabble*, *Sandy River Review*, *Barzakh Magazine*, *Bluntly Magazine*, *Badlands Literary Journal*, among others. My visual work has appeared in *Vox Populi*, *The Indianapolis Review*, *Typehouse Literary Magazine*, *The New Southern Fugitives*, *Glassworks and Existere Journal of Arts*. My translations have appeared in *LIT Magazine*, *The Bangalore Review*, *The Bombay Literary Magazine*, *The Bombay Review*, *Borderless*, *Kitaab*, *Muse India*, and *Punch The Magazine*.

The alarm went off at eleven o'clock. Rajni, who was lying on the bed, turned her attention to the clock. She looked around. Her husband was sitting in his armchair, bent over the table. There was a pile of books in front of him. He was finding things in the book and writing them down in his notebook. The lenses of his glasses glimmered in the light of the table lamp. He would stretch his neck a few times and then return to writing. Rajni looked at him carefully.

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Half the light of the table lamp fell on his face and the other half on the papers. He was working so hard. Maybe he was working on his PhD. Even if he finishes the PhD, what will come of it? It's not like anything came of anything else he's done. These thoughts were running through her head. All day long, he bangs his head on these books like a madman. He doesn't care about the house or his family. He just says that once the PhD is finished, you'll not need to work. Three years had passed since her marriage, but Rajni still felt as if she were a virgin. It seemed as if a year or a year and a half had passed since she came to England from India. But what joy has she felt after coming here? No sooner did she get here, and she had to start worrying about finding a job while her bookworm husband was lost in his studies. On several occasions, she considered gathering all of his books and tossing them into the street but she couldn't muster the courage to do it. He would gather her in his arms and say very lovingly, when this PhD is done, whatever book I write, I will dedicate to you: "To my dear wife Raji." Rajni forced a smile for a moment.

Rajni turned around and began to look out from the bedroom window. The moon was shining in the sky. There were no clouds to be seen and there wasn't even the slightest breeze. Comparing herself to the moon she thought that perhaps the moon, like her, was alone and traveling by itself. She closed her eyes and tried to fall asleep but she couldn't sleep. She couldn't sleep with the light on. She preferred the darkness. She turned off the light and lay down in her own bed and became lost in her dream world and then she finally fell asleep after her mind finally exhausted itself.

It was midnight. Aman was still reading. She remembered when she was studying in college and had a roommate in the hostel named Kiran. The two of them would usually argue at night. Kiran would study late into the night but Rajni would holler at her to turn off the light because she can't sleep with the lights on. Both would become exhausted from arguing and they'd fall asleep. She kept recalling these various incidents. Kiran would get up early and bring piping hot tea from the mess for her. "Oh, my queen! Drink up!" She would drink the tea. Then, together, they would clean the room. They would quickly press their clothes, eat breakfast in the mess and would hurry off to college. In the evening, they would rush home. But there was charm in this life, she reminisced.

Aman turned off the light and came in to lay with her on the bed. Rajni deliberately closed her eyes but Aman wrapped his arms around her neck. Rajni felt as if she was suffocating. But in these situations, she was on autopilot. It was like this every day. The woman inside her died long ago. It seemed to her that every day Aman was raping a corpse. But she said nothing. She had to endure this trial for half an hour and then there would be peace until the following night. She lost herself in her thoughts. Aman's snoring kept her awake. She rolled over and began to look outside. Mother nature had spread out a cool moonlight. She wanted to pick up her bed and bring it outside into the courtyard. But how could she lift the bed? She became angry at her helplessness. "What kind of bastard country is this? There is no freedom to sleep, to eat, to live." She once again began to look outside into the darkness. She felt as if she was with some mannequin, not a real man.

Aman rolled over and Rajni became lost in her past. She remembered her time in the hostel when she and Kiran would stay out late talking on the campus grounds. Girls were making a racket here and there. The girls would enjoy themselves well into midnight, dancing giddha and bhangra. Rajni was their heroine. If there was any plan, she was a part of it. She was the life of the hostel.

She would write her own poetry and recite it to the girls. The girls enjoyed listening to her poems. It was a crazy age. She remembered one moonlit night like this when she was laying on the ground with her head in Kiran's lap. Kiran said, "Rajni. You should become my sister-in-law."

"Why?" She screamed in surprise.

"Because I like you very much. My brother has a factory for warm clothes. He has a lot of money and he will love you a lot. You will live in luxury."

"No Kiran. I do not like businessmen. You know my tastes. My husband should be a poet, a writer, an artist..." She became lost in her thoughts.

"Fine. Go ahead and marry a poet. You'll be hungry your entire life, you silly romantic!" Kiran put her head on the ground, then stood up, stomped her feet and left.

Time flew in Rajni's reveries. Who knows how she ended up marrying Aman. Aman, who was born, raised and educated in England. Maybe she got caught up in the glamour. Once she saw how handsome Aman was, she couldn't refuse. But now it seems everything turned out wrong. She felt as if this wasn't a marriage but rather a suicide. She and Aman were so different. She had put on a sad melody but Aman turned off the tape recorder and began to play an English song. He never liked her Hindi films. Whether it the voice of Rafi, the sorrow of Mukesh, the Hir of Varis, or the pain of Shiv; Aman was clueless. They only had a physical connection, not an intellectual one. She realized that her only obligation was physical, but this was not living.

The clock struck one o'clock, but sleep was elusive. She again began to drown herself in the ocean of her deepest thoughts. She remembered one day when she became fed up with Aman and said "Aman, let's go to our India. There we will find good jobs for us. Let's go there and make our own beautiful world."

"You know...I am British...The meaning of being British is that you are valued throughout the world. What is missing here? Moreover, you've just arrived. And after living here for five to seven years, you'll get a British passport...And then you'll figure out what the value of British citizenship. You will quickly become a British citizen because of me." She didn't know what he went on saying.

Rajni became furious with herself. She wanted to tear her Indian passport into pieces and throw it at him. This was such a pitiful situation. She had no existence of her own. If she had anything, it was because of Aman. She felt as if she were a cripple and Aman was a stick that she needed to stand. Or, perhaps she was standing on slippery road and only Aman could help her steady herself. If she were to take a single step in any direction away from him, she would fall. She began to feel sorry for herself. Alas! She never should've left her country and come so far. She felt like a nullity.

She thought back to some days ago when Aman was furious with her. He rarely became angry. But on occasion, seeing her cool behavior, he would get irritated. It was her birthday and, on this occasion, he had brought her a watch. Rajni put it in a drawer instead of wearing it.

"Raji, I bought you this watch to wear—not to keep safe." He was boiling with anger.

"Aman, I don't like to wear a watch. Whenever I wear a watch, I keep looking at the time. Noticing the time, I feel like I'm wasting time. Life is passing from my hands. But when I never see the time, it seems as if time just passes. Please, don't mind..." She politely said.

"Fine. Drop this matter of the watch. I never see you respond affectionately to my love. You are always quiet. Even in bed it seems you are doing a job...not making love..." He was quaking with rage.

"Aman, you are correct to say that I don't return your love. And for how long can a person pretend? I am tired of pretending to be in love, Aman...I am emotionally very isolated. Living abroad can never fill my soul's emptiness. I feel as if we are from two separate cultures which have been brought together by the fault of our parents...Neither is this fair to you nor to me."

"Raji, why? For what reason? Do I not love you? Are you not happy with me? Am I not attractive? Tell me what my shortcoming is..." He was shaking her by her shoulders.

"Aman, there is nothing wrong with you. You are handsome, you are young, and you give me everything that any woman would want from her husband. But sometimes there comes a time in life when a person wants to have intellectual intercourse with someone. When a person realizes that they don't have a proper conversational partner, they feel defeated and broken. Her soul dies. Just like mine has died..." She went on talking, and Aman kept on looking at her face.

That day passed, and today has come. From that point onward, Aman had no hope from her. And even before that day, she had already been broken. Time was passing by. Now they were like room-mates. They would both get up, go off to their respective jobs, and they'd be together in the evening.

They'd cook dinner together and eat together. They'd go out somewhere and then go to sleep. This became their daily routine. Neither had any complaint with the other.

After thinking for who knows how long, Rajni fell asleep. She realized that she had fallen asleep only when the alarm clock struck seven in the morning. With her sleepy eyes, she looked to her right side. Aman had drunk his own tea and left some tea for her in the thermos. It was also her time to go to work. She hauled her tired body out of bed. She poured some tea in a cup and began to drink it. The piping hot tea woke her up, and she gratefully thanked her roommate for the tea to drink.