

SUSHAM BEDI

THE FIRE SACRIFICE

(HAVAN)

Translated from the Hindi by
David Rubin

HEINEMANN

SUSHAM BEDI was born in Ferozpur, Punjab, India and studied at Delhi University and Punjab University, Chandigarh. As a teenager she became a leading actress in Hindi dramas on All India Radio and later on television. She began writing at school and won many awards for poetry and short stories as an undergraduate but her writing career began in earnest in 1978 when her first story was published in the literary magazine *Kahani*: Susham Bedi's first novel, *Havan (The Fire Sacrifice)*, was serialised in the magazine *Ganga* and published as a novel in 1989. It was published in Urdu in 1992. Since then she has published two more novels, *Lautna* or *The Returning* (1992) and *Itar* or *The Other* (1992). All three deal with the problems and cultural dilemmas of Indians living in the West. Susham Bedi taught in Delhi and Punjab Universities until 1975 when she followed her husband to Brussels where she became a correspondent for the Times of India. She has lived in the United States since 1979 and has been teaching in Hindi Language and Literature at Columbia University in New York since 1985.

DAVID RUBIN has a Ph.D. in comparative literature from Columbia University, where he has taught Indian literature and Hindi. He has translated several volumes of Hindi and Nepali fiction and poetry. Among his other publications are novels, short stories, and *After The Raj*, a critical study of British fiction about the sub-continent in the years following Indian independence.

Heinemann Educational
A Division of Heinemann Publishers (Oxford) Ltd
Halley Court, Jordan Hill, Oxford OX2 8EJ

Heinemann: A Division of Reed Publishing (USA) Inc.
361 Hanover Street, Portsmouth, NH 03801-3912, USA

Heinemann Educational Books (Nigeria) Ltd
PMB 5205, Ibadan

Heinemann Educational Boleswa
PO Box 10103, Village Post Office, Gaborone, Botswana

FLORENCE PRAGUE PARIS MADRID
ATHENS MELBOURNE JOHANNESBURG
AUCKLAND SINGAPORE TOKYO
CHICAGO SAO PAULO

First published in India under the title
Havan by Parag Pralashan in 1989

© Susham Bedi 1989

This translation © David Rubin 1993

First published by Heinemann Educational in 1993

Series Editor: Ranjana Sidhanta Ash

The right of Susham Bedi to be identified as the author of this work
has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs
and Patents Act 1988.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Cover design by Touchpaper
Cover illustration by Mike Bennion

ISBN 0435 95087 8

Phototypeset by Cambridge Composing (UK) Ltd, Cambridge
Printed and bound in Great Britain
by Cox & Wyman Ltd, Reading, Berkshire

93 94 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Introduction to the Asian Writers Series

Heinemann's new Asian Writers Series, aided by the Arts Council of Great Britain, intends to introduce English language readers to some of the interesting fiction written in languages that most will neither know nor study.

For too long popular acclaim for Asian writing in the West has been confined to the handful of authors who choose to write in English rather than in the language of their own cultures. Heinemann's entry into the field should dispel this narrow perspective and place modern Asian writing within the broad spectrum of contemporary world literature.

The first six works selected for the series are translations of novels from five languages: Bengali, Hindi, Malayalam, Tamil and Urdu. The six novels span seventy-five years of change in the subcontinent. *Quartet*, one of Rabindranath Tagore's most skilfully constructed and lively classics, was first published in 1916, whereas the most recent work chosen, *The Fire Sacrifice*, was written by the up-and-coming Hindi novelist Susham Bedi and first published in 1989.

These first six titles face the normal problems affecting literature in translation, not least the difficulty of establishing an exact parallel of the thought or verbal utterance of the original in the target language. When the source text is in a non-European language and embodies a culture and literary style quite alien to English language readers, the translator's task is made even more difficult.

Susan Bassnett in her invaluable work on translation studies describes the typical colonial attitude to the literature of the

colonised as a 'master and servant' relationship, with the European translator attempting to 'improve' and 'civilise' the source text. At the other end of the scale she describes a kind of 'cannibalism' in which the translator almost 'devours' the text to disgorge a totally new product. Fortunately, the translators of this series fall into neither category but manage to retain a balanced view of their craft.

While it is very important to produce a translation that uses a style both readable and engaging to an English language readership, it must not obscure the particularities of literary devices, figures of speech, and aesthetic detail that the author uses to convey his or her sensibility, imagination and verbal artistry. Should such faithfulness to the original produce in the English version a greater degree of sentiment or charged imagery than the reader might expect, one hopes that he or she will be ready to accept the novelty of writing from an unfamiliar source.

In publishing the Asian Writers Series, Heinemann is taking a bold step into an area which has been neglected for too long. It is our hope that readers will respond with interest and enthusiasm as they discover the outstanding quality of these novels.

RANJANA SIDHANTA ASH, SERIES EDITOR, 1993

Introduction to The Fire Sacrifice

Susham Bedi's first novel, *The Fire Sacrifice*, is in the tradition of social realism in Hindi fiction that began with Premchand about the time of the First World War. Premchand and his contemporaries in other regional languages devoted most of their attention to the problems of the underprivileged, but in the period following Indian Independence in 1947 novelists have been more preoccupied with the middle classes, their alienation, and the tension between modernisation and conservative religious values. Susham Bedi brings her own originality to bear on the tradition, both by treating the particular problems and cultural conflicts of Indians who have migrated to the West and by developing a technique in which realistic observation is tempered by psychological subtlety.

The Fire Sacrifice was published in 1989 both in book form and in a serialised magazine version. *Havan*, the Hindi title of the novel, is the name of an ancient sacrificial ritual performed on auspicious occasions and for purification. It acquired great importance from the Arya Samaj movement founded by Swami Dayananda Sarasvati in 1875. The Arya Samaj, to which Mrs Bedi's family belongs, advocated a reformed Hinduism based on its Vedic origins, and emphasised ethical principles, the equality of women, and the rejection of untouchability and child marriage.

Guddo, the heroine of *The Fire Sacrifice*, is profoundly influenced by Dayananda's teachings but is nevertheless both a sensual and an ambitious woman. As an attractive widow she is extremely vulnerable, especially in the emigré Indian community of Westernised doctors and other professionals in New York, where

Indian conventions may be more easily ignored than in India. In her struggle to provide education and opportunities for her son and two daughters, Guddo makes many sacrifices, working in menial positions and living in a sordid flat to economise; but, as she comes to realise, she also sacrifices her principles, using her affair with an Indian doctor not only for his help in finding positions for her children but also, though she is loath to admit it, for her own gratification.

There is a satirical undercurrent in the depiction of the affluent New York Indian community, with their lip-service to Hindu ideals and their tax-deductible contributions for the construction of more and more new temples. Guddo's two sons-in-law, both doctors, are conceited and materialistic; in their public lives they appear thoroughly Americanised but at home they expect their wives, who have their own professional careers, to remain completely subservient.

Ultimately the implicit question remains unanswered: is it possible to remain genuinely Indian and survive in the West? Testing the problem, *The Fire Sacrifice* presents a wide range of Indian personalities, Hindu and Muslim, doctors, lawyers and taxi-drivers, coping with discrimination, home-sickness and bewilderment. Guddo, with a master's degree and a teaching certificate, must work in a newspaper stall and later as a salesgirl; one of her brothers-in-law, formerly a well-to-do mine manager, becomes a doorman. Indians marry Americans, and both Indians and Americans become victims of the other. Guddo succeeds in her driving ambition to bring prosperity to her children but at the novel's end happiness still eludes her.

Beyond giving us a dramatic and compassionate account of the problems of Indians trying to make a new life abroad, *The Fire Sacrifice*, like all good fiction, reminds us of the universality of human nature and the common experience of people no matter how divergent their origins and cultures.

DAVID RUBIN, 1993

A Note on the Translation

Readers who compare the English translation with the original Hindi will find that the two do not in all instances accord exactly; this is because Susham Bedi made a few revisions and abridgements in her text while preparing it for translation. The translator is grateful to her and to Professor Frances Pritchett of Columbia University for many helpful suggestions in the course of this undertaking. A Glossary may be found on page 181.

Six

The next time Guddo got her pay cheque she went out during her lunch break, cashed it, and bought some games for Raju and playthings for Arjun. On the way home that evening, though she was tired from all her running around at lunchtime, she still felt light-hearted, thinking that Arjun would be pleased with his toys and this might relieve the tense atmosphere in the apartment.

But when she came through the front door of the apartment house and started up the stairs she was struck with a presentiment of something wrong. Brushing it aside, she hurried straight on to the apartment, put the key in the lock and opened the door. She was still thinking of the packages in her hand until she looked inside and was scarcely able to believe the sight that met her eyes. Her big trunk was lying on the floor not far from the door, and close by, Raju sat on a stool staring at it; he looked terrified. Her clothes were scattered all about as though they had been pulled from their hangers and thrown down in anger. Before she could grasp what had happened, Pinki came rushing from the kitchen, shouting:

'Please, sister, have mercy on us, let me live in peace! We have our lives too, you know. I can't stand any more of this! Quarreling every day, Satinder in a rage - I can't take it!' Then softening her angry tone a little, she went on, 'I'm sorry I have to be so rude but you've really gone too far. You've been earning a living for a long time now, so please, can't you make some other arrangements for yourself?'

Guddo was speechless. In her wildest dreams she had never imagined a scene like this. Today the pistol was in her sister's

hand; she felt the panic shoot through her like a bullet. All she could manage to say, in a weak voice, was 'What . . . what happened?'

And now Satinder was confronting her, his words striking her ears like hammer blows. 'We spent our hard-earned money to bring her here and she doesn't give a damn about us. If I ask Raju to go to the store to bring me a bottle of soda he doesn't even get off the bed. I ask you, is there any reason we have to run ourselves ragged waiting on her? Do we even have to go out and find her a place to live too? Tell her, it doesn't matter where she goes but she can't stay here. I won't have them in the house a minute longer!'

Guddo stood there, as though stupefied. She had no idea where she could go at this time of night. Softly she said, 'Look, Pinki, don't put us out on the street. Starting tomorrow I'll look for another place. Whatever kind of place I find, I'll move. But where can I go at this hour?'

The only person she knew in the neighbourhood was the old gentleman who spoke Hindi. If she'd taken a liking to him he could have been useful at a moment like this - but she'd never bothered to find out his address or even his name.

With Satinder standing by, Pinki spoke even more angrily. 'You've been looking at other places for a long time but you always turn your nose up. When that Gujarati girl wanted to share her place with you why didn't you go? But the truth is, you'd have had to pay your full share then while you could live here for nothing . . .'

'But how could I share with anybody when I have Raju? And after seeing what sharing is here . . .'

This last sentence infuriated Pinki. All Guddo had meant was that in order to keep up her son's education and assure his independence she really ought to have her own place all to herself, but it came out in this sarcastic way. But Guddo was the one to be hurt as Pinki burst out:

'Yes, if only you knew how to share! Right from the beginning everybody told me that Indians didn't have any idea of how to live in a civilised way. You've made this apartment so dirty I

hate to step inside it. Everything's in disorder, everything out of place. You can't keep house the way you did in India, the standards here are rather different, you know!

This attack struck at Guddo's whole sense of herself as a civilised person; no longer humble, she suddenly launched a counter attack. 'Oh marvellous, and I suppose you're an angel of cleanliness? Oh yes, you've turned into a real American. I suppose you were born here? I've seen your idea of cleanliness. Stuffing the dirty clothes under the beds, shutting up all the filth in closets and drawers and spraying fragrances, that's your idea of being clean. Don't think you're so high and mighty – you came from the same place I did! Just because you've got a few dollars now it's gone to your head, so you think you can simply throw me out of your house. Just where do you get off ordering me around? If my husband were alive today we'd see if you'd dare insult your big sister like this. I brought you up with my own hands, I washed your diapers, and you talk about being clean! You used to come back from the toilet smeared with filth, you didn't even know enough to keep your nose clean.'

Losing all control, she yelled, 'I spit, I spit on your house! God will punish you for the way you've treated me, don't think He won't! You can't put me out, I'm leaving. God brought me here, God will take care of me now. And to think I thought I should feel grateful to you! What right have you anyway to invite me or send me away? It's God alone who can do such things!'

Guddo's whole body felt as though it were on fire, her hands trembled with her emotion. Raju was frightened: he had never before seen his mother act like this. Throwing his arms around her he shouted, 'Stop it, Mummy, please stop it!' Then, in a frightened voice, 'Can't we go to Aunt Gita's house, Mummy?'

At this Guddo, suddenly aware of her helplessness, burst into tears. 'My fate is cursed,' she said. 'Otherwise would we ever have come here? We're going to have to go wandering the streets, that's what it's come to. If they meant to treat us so badly why did they send for us? Now they call us dirty and stingy! But when they came to our house they stayed for months at a time. How cruel they are, how unjust! Only God can punish them for it.'

As she said this Guddo felt like some pure spirit whose curse is all-powerful. Pinki and Satinder stood there in silence. Though they regretted what had happened and felt it was their duty to persuade her not to leave they couldn't get out the words that might stop her. They feared that if they said anything at all she might actually stay and start up the trouble all over again. Because the best thing for everybody – no one could doubt it! – would be for Guddo to go away. They stood silent, waiting for her to take her first step out through the door.

Seven

In the taxi on the way to Gita's house Guddo tried to calm herself by reciting *mantras*, the *mantras* for the fire sacrifice which she had memorised. 'Yatkamaste . . .' What could that sage have meant by desire? All Vedic philosophy, all the *mantras* always spoke of bringing happiness to this earthly life, even the happiness of material success as well . . . For through performing all those actions and all those rituals, one reaches the Supreme Being. But was self-realisation really the truth of life? For self-realisation was a kind of selfishness. Pettiness and weakness too . . .

So what must I do? Guddo wondered. Was she doing the right thing now? At this point she couldn't retreat to India, she'd get nowhere at all with a teacher's salary of 700 rupees. No, she had to go on here, this was where she was fated to struggle.

Gita had settled in Flushing, about twenty kilometres away, where housing was much cheaper than in Manhattan. A lot of Indians who came to New York had taken up residence in Flushing. Shops selling Indian saris, Indian groceries and appliances running on 220 volts – destined to be sent back home – were becoming more numerous as more and more Indians came here to live.

Gita's apartment was on the seventh floor of a ten-storey building that had an elevator. With only two bedrooms the apartment offered no room to spare. Gita's three children, Kanika, Radhika and Ashok, slept in one of the bedrooms, Gita and Jijaji in the other, so they arranged for Guddo and Raju to sleep in the living room. Every night a mattress and bedding

were put down on the floor, and early every morning Guddo would go off to work, Raju to school, and the room became a living room again. By day there was no one at home to use it except Jijaji, whose work hours were from either four in the afternoon to midnight or midnight to eight in the morning. Daytime was when he got most of his sleep. When Ashok and Radhika came back from school around three-thirty they sometimes saw Jijaji for a few minutes, as a matter of duty, and often did not see him at all. Radhika was thirteen now, Ashok eleven, and Kanika, who at sixteen was in her last year of high school, did not come home until around five-thirty.

Every morning and every evening the apartment was terribly crowded and full of noisy bickering. Among the children there was never an end to the disputes over which TV programme to watch. Radhika, sharp-tongued when she was angry, would trade insults in English with Ashok. All evening the telephone kept ringing, mostly calls from Radhika's girlfriends, and she would talk for hours. Though they scolded her constantly, she just kept on doing what she wanted.

Kanika's position in the household was somewhat different: her parents took everything she said very seriously. Gita often remarked on how intelligent Kanika was, and Kanika, as though aware of her importance, did not talk much with anyone at home. Every evening she had to see to some serious work for school, term papers and the like, and as soon as she got back would shut herself up in her parents' room to study.

It took Guddo an hour and a half to get home from work by subway every evening, and she worried constantly about Raju, who also had a long subway ride to school. One day she'd seen three boys get up from the seat across the aisle, pull out revolvers, and order all the passengers to hand over their money and jewelry. When one man took too much time one of the boys fired at him and he collapsed. Guddo could not tell if he was wounded or dead. She had to give them her gold chain, her watch and the few dollars she was carrying. The moment the train stopped the three boys ran off with their bag of loot. There was a commotion and the train was held in the station for a long time while the

police took away the man who'd been shot and questioned the passengers.

Guddo experienced less panic in this shared experience than she had when she was robbed earlier, but her general uneasiness increased. Here anything could happen at any time! Would the man who'd been shot survive? Her mouth felt as dry as cotton wool from anxiety. Her Raju . . . he too was constantly riding the trains. And those boys looked no older than high school students. She would have to ask the principal not to keep Raju late at school, he had to be home by four. She really must have him transfer to a school closer to home. Every day now she kept giving him special instructions. Often she would meet him near the store and the two would come back together. As soon as she stepped into one of the trains, that scene always rose before her eyes and she would silently recite *mantras* for Raju's safety and her own. She consoled herself by thinking that whenever you did anything at all – even just getting into the train – if you remembered a *mantra*, your wishes would be fulfilled. This was the best she could do to quiet her anxiety.

Right from the beginning Gita made it clear that Guddo was expected to contribute to the household expenses. Everything was so expensive that she and Jijaji already used their full salary to keep up and could not get by supporting two more people. So Guddo was to give her three hundred dollars every month – Guddo whose monthly salary was a mere six hundred. But this way, at least, she wasn't obliged to feel beholden to anybody. Still, she was shocked that her sister wanted to make money at her expense. But this could only be Jijaji's idea – since he was unsuccessful in every other undertaking, he could at least make money through her. Well, Guddo, for her part, had managed to save up some money while she was staying at Pinki's – one had to make the most of every opportunity.

And Jijaji, poor fellow, how could he be happy working as a doorman? It was no better than being a *chaprasi* or a *peon* in India. And perhaps he had suffered even more than Guddo. He was still selling at the sidewalk market on the weekends. So every Saturday and Sunday it was a ritual for the whole family to pick

up the goods, bring them to the sidewalk to spread out, pack up what was left, and finally count the money they had made. But they never made very much. Brass ashtrays and candlesticks, Nataraj figures and the rest of it had all become very commonplace by now. Jijaji said, 'When this stuff that's left over is finished we won't buy any new goods. Why keep on doing something you find unpleasant?' But didn't he find working as a doorman unpleasant too? Well, at least he earned a living from it. On the surface he looked very much the same but his words revealed his inner dissatisfaction and hostility. Because of his insecurity a strange kind of miserliness had affected his way of doing business – he kept an account of every penny and would spend nothing without long and careful consideration. Above and beyond the household expenses there was the cost of the children's education. If Kanika had not won a scholarship her school fees would have taken his whole salary and Gita's too. While she studied, Kanika also earned a bit by working a few hours in a library. Guddo felt that Jijaji's attitude and behaviour had changed very much, or perhaps until now she had never really known him.

One day she said to him, 'I've heard that almonds and pistachios are very cheap near the place where you work. When there's somebody going to India I'd like to send along some for my daughters. Do you think you could bring me six or seven pounds?'

She had hardly finished speaking when Jijaji answered, 'Give me the money for it in advance, and a couple of dollars for the subway fare both ways.'

Years before, when Guddo's husband died and she wanted to sell the twin beds, this same Jijaji had immediately taken out five hundred rupees and said, 'Take this, but don't sell the beds, they'll be something to remember Premkumarji by.' What had happened to that generosity of his since then? Now it seemed as though he was caressing every dollar with his eyes.

Guddo, feeling like an unwanted paying guest, was more and more uncomfortable in Gita's apartment. It wasn't convenient for Raju to study either; he had no quiet little corner to himself.

Guddo reflected, I'm paying three hundred every month and still it isn't the least bit like having my own home. So she began again to look for her own place and after some time found a one-room basement apartment for rent in a five-storey building not far from Gita's. The rent was a hundred and seventy-five dollars a month. Even though it was dark and damp in the basement, Guddo felt an intense need for privacy and peace, and Raju too had been waiting so long for the same thing. When Gita found out, she was aghast. She felt that Guddo had betrayed her by finding a new place on the sly, while Jijaji was angry at the extra income he was going to lose if Guddo left. Furthermore, he would miss teasing and flirting with her, for this had become a habit with him.

For her part, Guddo was now fed up with his amorous advances. He liked to put his hand on her shoulder and at night he'd ask her why she was arranging her bedding on the living room floor when she could come and sleep in his bed. Guddo always responded to his flirting with harsh reproaches. If Jijaji had been able somehow to console himself that Guddo was attracted to him, of course she would have been even more welcome in the house. But from the beginning Guddo had never given the slightest indication that she liked him at all. She had always been something of a puzzle to Jijaji. One evening after Premkumar's death, when they were both alone in the house in Chandigarh, he insisted that she come and see a film with him. She had refused, saying that if people saw them going out together, God knew what they would make of it. But now there were no people to see, and Guddo was tired to death of his constant jokes about 'Sister-in-law is half a wife,' and the like.

Guddo had never found Jijaji attractive; now that he had come down in the world she positively disliked him. She was one of those women for whom a man's worth depended not so much on his personal qualities as upon his social and financial status. When she became a widow her grief stemmed mostly from her realisation that she would no longer be regarded as the wife of an important official. That was why she spent beyond her capacity, to make sure her children received a superior education so that

they too could attain some status. And where she herself was concerned, she wanted to go on studying chiefly as a means of earning a better salary. For when her daughters came to New York they would not be able to get along on her salesgirl's wages.

She was determined to find something better. Then she learned that the federal government had established a job-training programme in Chinatown for poor people, citizens and immigrants alike. It included a course in accounting which offered a scholarship of one hundred dollars a week. With her MA in English, Guddo was more than qualified for acceptance. The only drawback was that even though she had been the wife of an officer of high rank her name would have to be listed among the city's poor and needy. So she looked around a bit more, but when nothing came through she went ahead and applied for the Federal training programme.