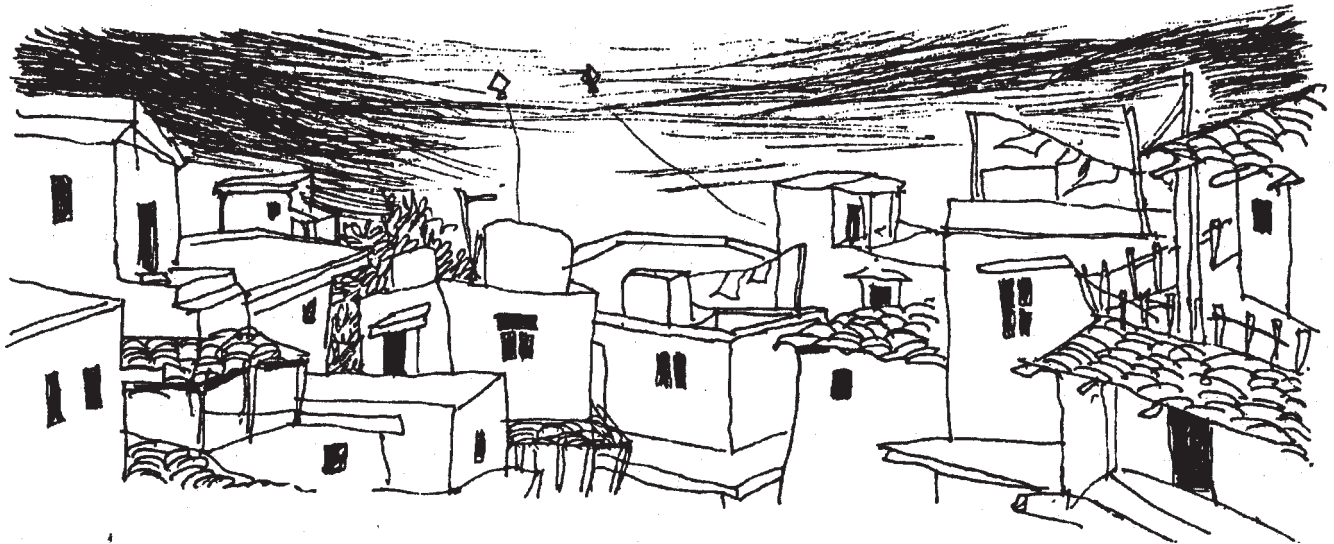


# Mira Danced

by

Mridula Garg

(translated from Hindi by Ruth Vanita)



THE sun had emerged after a heavy shower. Bright and sparkling. And a breeze was blowing. Rain-washed. Fresh. Sharp. Not like the breeze before the shower.

That was more like inhaling and exhaling. A bare movement that left the air as sultry as before. Only once in a while did the ends of the long scarf around my neck ripple, and I could breathe freely.

Now the breeze felt washed and light as if it had had a good cry. The tree tops danced as if ready to take wing and fly away had their roots not been firmly embedded in the earth.

I was hanging out wet clothes to dry on the roof. That was all that the sun's coming out meant to me. Wash the clothes and hang them out on the roof. The clothes have got soaked in the rain. Bring them in. Now the sun is out. Hang them out again. The clothes are dry. Bring them in. Anyhow, this allowed me to go up on the roof twice a day. And a couple

of times more, if there was a sudden shower.

While hanging out the clothes or taking them off the line, I would pause to look around. The apartment on the rooftop of the house facing ours was directly in my line of vision. Through its window I could see a table and chair. There was a boy who always sat there, reading. Morning and evening. If I ever went up late or if it grew dark earlier than usual because of the gathering clouds, a lamp would be lit on the table. He would be reading in its bright light that fell straight on his face. Does he study all the time? Has he nothing else to do?

Today I did not come down from the roof immediately after hanging up the clothes. I stretched out on the string bed that lay on the roof. Ma had gone to the temple. After assigning me dozens of chores. Scrub the utensils—don't you dare leave any stains in the heavy frying pan. Cook the lentils. Clean the rice and soak it. Chop the vegetables. When I

come back, I'll decide whether to cook them now or in the evening. But first of all wash the clothes and hang them out—who knows how long this sunshine will last. And put the pickles out in the sun. Today is a holiday, because the school annual function was held yesterday. All my classmates must be getting ready to go for an outing today. Ma didn't even allow me to attend the function.

All the chores remained to be done. So far I had only managed to wash the clothes. Oh well, I'll do the rest. Let me look at the sky for five minutes. What an open, a clear blue sky, with light white clouds swimming along like ducks. Not rain clouds. The clouds that appear after the rain. Holding a few left over drops of water, leaping and cavorting in the breeze, they come running along after the shower, like mischievous children who always arrive late at school. Children who never manage to make it to the assembly in time for prayers, however hard they run, and are punished daily.

Yet so thick skinned are they that they remain carefree as ever. Next day, they come along in the same way, playing with the pebbles on the street, and reach late. Everyone says, "You will never come to anything, you will be vagabonds when you grow up." How am I to know what the pleasures of vagabondage are—they must know, that is why they do it.

No one tells girls that they will not come to anything. They tell them, "Get an education otherwise you won't get a decent boy, you will be a burden on us all our life." If you are worn out with studying and recline on the bed for a moment, they say, "You lazy-bones, you will be of no account at your in-laws' place. These days boys want slim girls. If you become a fatso, how will you get a decent boy?"

A decent boy. Like the boy in the opposite house? Always studying. Stupid fellow. Removing my eyes from the wastrel, wandering clouds I fixed them on the window opposite. Poor bookworm must be sitting and studying, as usual.

What was this? He was standing near the parapet of the roof, and dancing. Peacocks dance in the rain, maddened by the freshly washed sunshine. Poor fellow! Too much studying has driven him crazy. What if he jumps across, towards me? I sat up with a jerk. Then I suddenly realised that he could see me if I sat up, so I lay down again. No, no, how can he jump across to me—the alley lies between the two houses. When one lies down and looks at the sky spread out above, all other distances fade into nothingness.

I sat up. How he danced! Swaying to one side as the branches of trees sway. The branches straighten their heads with a jerk, so did he. He moved his hands in circles as one does when averting the evil eye from a loved one. Then he would throw his hands out, again and again. His feet would move swiftly.

Tat tatathai tathai tathai. Tat tata thai tathai tathai.

Thai tatatatatat tatat. Thai tatatat tatat tatat.

Tat tatathai tathai tathai. Thai tatathai tathai tathai.

Tathai tathai thai tathai. Tathai thai tathai tathai.

Then, whirling round and round in circles.

Tigdha-a-a-a- thig. Dha-a-a-a-thai tigdha-a-

A-a-tigdha-a-a-a-...Thai tattat. Dha-a-tirkit...kath.

What do I know of circles and movements? I haven't learnt Kathak, have I? There is a Kathak class at school, after study hours. Other girls in my class learn Kathak. How eager I was to dance! When I asked my mother she pulled my plait as if she would pluck it out: "You want to learn dancing and sit in a brothel, you ill-fated creature." I used to stay back for five or ten minutes to watch the others. I learnt some of the beats by hearing them repeated every day. I find it easy to remember such things. But when it comes to studying, my memory goes *phut*. Yesterday, they were to perform at the function. They used to practise at home every day. I watched the rehearsal only once, though. Ma doesn't like me to go to anyone's house. Yesterday's function too...

Tiny drops bubbling in the clouds. Spilling over. Some fell on my hair, some lodged in the corners of my eyes.

Just look at that bookworm dancing as if intoxicated. But I know this is no Kathak. He is dancing just for pleasure, because he feels like it.

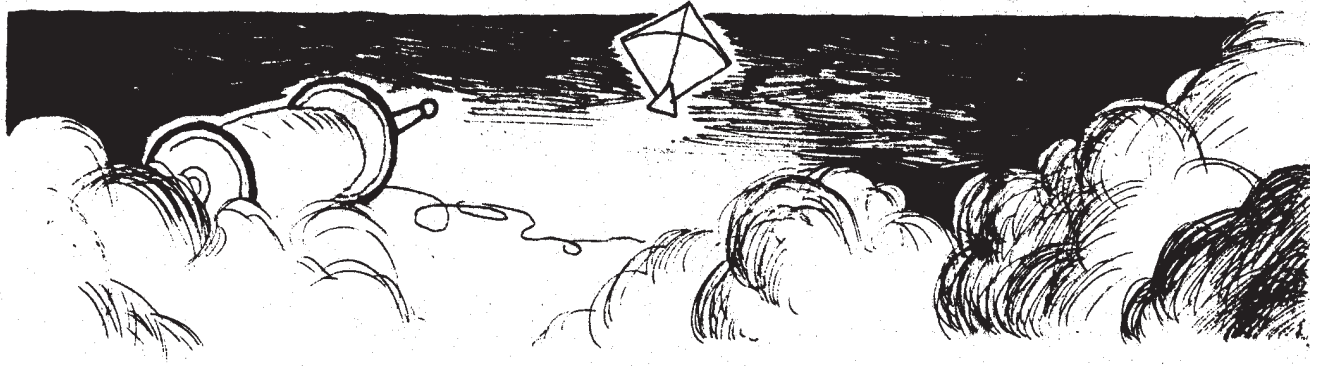
Shall I dance too? I softly stepped off the bed. No, what if Ma hears the tapping of my feet. I may get too absorbed to hear her return. She'll chop off my head. Whom were you trying to attract with your dancing, you whore?

Whom is he trying to attract with his dancing? The thought made me pause. He hasn't seen me, has he? Mishra *bahanji* used to say that when raindrops fall, the peacock dances to attract the peahen. Unthinkingly, I mentioned this in Ma's presence and she gave me a hard

slap across the face. Is this what you learn at school?

Things were much better for us in the village. Father used to send us money from the city. When I was in the village school, I used to stand first in class, I was not a total flop as I am here. But then something happened and the money stopped coming. Ma wept and cried and made enquiries about father. Then, one day, without informing him, she landed up here in the city with me in tow. What an epic battle that was between them! Father threw Ma out of the house. And me along with her. He locked the house and went away. Ma stayed put in the verandah with me. Hungry and thirsty. I was almost dead with hunger. Mishra *bahanji*, the teacher, lives next door. Hearing me crying, she took me to her house and fed me. Ma refused to eat. She sat as if on hunger strike. When father returned after three days all the neighbours reproached him bitterly. Both of us were half-dead—Ma from hunger and I from fear. He was forced to admit defeat and to let us in. For some days it went on like that, crying and complaining, putting up with his abuses and threats. Then things improved. Or perhaps we got used to this state of affairs. Mishra *bahanji* got me admitted into school. Ma stopped trying to keep guard over father and turned her attentions to me instead. If she had her way, she would not let me set foot out of the house. Not even to go to school. But then she wouldn't find a decent boy, you see!

O god, is he trying to kill himself? His dancing has taken him on to the water tank and he's flinging out his hands even more freely. Why does he keep raising his head to look up into the sky? Look down, you idiot, down. If your feet slip off that narrow tank, your head will be smashed to pieces. You are three storeys above the ground, you lunatic. How firmly he plants his feet. He comes to the edge, and then retreats, still dancing. My heart is in my mouth. He's an accomplished dancer. But he always



has his head buried in a book. When does he practise? I've never seen him dance before. I've been watching him regularly for six months. He always sits inside the room, reading. Before him, an elderly couple lived in that room. The woman used to sit on the roof, always cleaning some grain or other. The clothes she washed puffed and flapped on the line, like balloons filled with air. Ma would take me by the ear and point them out to me: "Look there, you wretch, that is how clothes are to be hung out, with pegs at both ends." When I hung out clothes, I'd be sure to run short either of pegs or of space on the line. I liked the look of her air-filled clothes. As if they would fly away into the sky if you so much as blew on them. Swiftly.

Like his dance. It grows swifter every moment. He jumps up and moves his hands as if uncoiling something. This is the way boys in the village used to fly kites. What a prize idiot I am! It's a kite he is flying, after all. The kite and string are not to be seen, that's why he seemed to be dancing in the breeze.

Where is the kite? It must be there, westward. He is gazing in that direction. But where exactly? I looked up into the sky but could see nothing. I stepped forward to the edge of our roof and glanced down, then stood on tip-toe and looked up, sheltering my eyes with one hand from the sun's glare, but couldn't see anything.

Where is the kite? What is it like? What are its colours? O what fun it is to

fly a kite! Hariya's father used to say one has lived in vain if one has not flown a kite when the raindrops fall lightly. But do girls ever get such freedom? To stand in an open space and rise ever upward with a kite into an equally open sky? At most, you can swing a short, measured distance under a tree, with water constantly dripping on you. Ma would drag me indoors but I would manage to slip away with Hariya from next door. I would quietly cross the fields and fly kites. Ma wouldn't get to know.

Even if she did, she would just give me a scolding. Those days, in the village, she didn't beat me up. Nor did she curse and taunt me, as she does here. "You too will become a whore like her, you will lure strange men." Only once did I ask, "Like whom?" Ma beat me so badly that Mishra *bahanji* had to come and rescue me.

She forced Ma to promise that she would not vent her frustration on me. She didn't ever beat me as badly again, after that. But sometimes I think an actual beating is better than a tongue lashing. And then this constantly keeping watch over me. She lets me come up on the roof alone only because the rheumatic pains in her legs make it hard for her to climb the stairs. But if I try to relax for a moment, she starts yelling from below: "Are you dead, you sinful female? Or has a witch eaten you up or a genie abducted you?"

In the beginning, she used to come limping up after me. But when she saw no young man anywhere around, she

was reassured. If she saw him dancing... O god! I trembled. She hasn't come back, has she? She has locked the door and taken the key with her. So when she returns she won't even knock but will come in soundlessly like a ghost. I'd better go down and check...

O look, look, what's he doing? Why has he come to the edge of the tank? O, he's turned back, there's a spool of string in his hands. He's throwing out his hands and unwinding the string. And flinging his head back to look far up into the sky. So the kite has gone still farther and higher up. If he can see it, why can't I? Once again, I strained neck and toes to look that way but couldn't see a thing. Perhaps that acacia tree is in the way. Why is the cursed thing so tall and leafy? One just can't see through it.

I'll go down and see. Perhaps I'll be able to see it from the alley. I ran downstairs. Only when I had wrapped my scarf well round my head and pushed at the door did I remember that it was locked from outside. I ran back upstairs again immediately.

He was still dancing away. Oblivious to my being or not being on the roof. Blockhead. After all, one can take one's eyes off a kite for a moment. But no - that was it. His kite-flying was not like that of the boys of my village. There was a rhythm in the movements of his feet, in the swaying of his body, and a song in his whole being. I too wanted to sing, to dance: "Tying anklet bells on her feet, Mira danced." As the priest in the temple

had suddenly begun to dance while singing on Janmashtami evening. The women singing had also started to sway with him as if they were dancing too, although seated. Tears flowed from Ma's eyes. How astonished I was. I had never seen her cry except when screaming abuses. She was unaware of herself, of me. That was why I could gaze around wide-eyed, at everyone, without being rebuked. Unbidden, unexpected, pity and love for her welled up in me. I liked this Ma, immersed in herself, self-enraptured.

Self-enraptured. Yes, that was the real thing, not the rhythm or beat. His dance on the tank and the parapet would have been the same as that of my companions flying kites in the fields if his and my feet had moved side by side on the ground, and if we had been chatting or raising a racket at intervals.

But he was flying the kite as if he knew of nothing but kite-flying. His eyes saw nothing else. Neither I nor anything else was in his field of vision. His hands, unwinding the string or pulling it back, had become part of the spool. That was why I had not seen the spool for so long. His feet too moved only as far as was necessary for his hands to retain that control over it.

I caught my breath. That means he is unaware of the parapet too. If he falters or gets distracted, he'll fall straight down. I stopped moving and watched him, holding my breath.

I began to understand. He was flying the kite in the same way as he studied every day, giving over his whole self to it. I remembered the story of Arjun that we had read at school. Before asking the pupils to aim at the bird, Dronacharya asked them: "What do you see?" Others gave different answers, but he saw only the bird's eye. Now at last I understand the story. And here am I, a good-for-nothing. I see the whole world but never see the bird's eye. Ma keeps scolding me for not putting my mind to my studies. Forget her, she doesn't know anything. But Mishra teacher doesn't sing songs about decent boys. She says:

"Concentrate on your studies, your mind will be at peace, the gateways of your intellect will be opened, you will be able to do whatever you want." But I have no powers of concentration. Just a mind that is for ever wandering. Constantly fuming against Ma. And father... he never raises his eyes to look at me. Why did we leave the village to come here? When I studied in the village school I didn't have to live in fear as I do here. It seems to me I will be free only when I get out of this house. Then I think, what if I get a "boy" like father? I too, like Ma...no, I don't want to become such a miserable, cruel, quarrelsome, ill-behaved woman. But what has my wanting to do with it?

Right now, I want to fly a kite. Can I? It's easy for him, he's a boy. He can sit on a chair and read when he wants, dance on the roof and fly a kite when he wants. He's his own master. No scoldings, no taunts, no abuses, no waiting, imprisoned, for a decent boy. No one ever said to him; "Why didn't you die at birth, you she-devil? I had a boy and he died, but this witch stayed alive."

My brother who died would have been about his age. If he had lived, we would have flown kites together. But, who knows, perhaps he would have flown the kite, and I, just as I am now....

O look, what a big kite! Black and blue. Skirring along on the wind like an arrow towards us. But it's coming from the opposite direction, from the east. The bookworm is looking west-ward. O no, this belongs to someone else. It must have come from those houses in the back row. He hasn't even noticed it. Turn round and look, you blockhead, it will slash your kite. What's the good of sticking your neck up into the sky and flying the kite ever higher?

Look, look, I was about to yell, but swallowed the words and stood stock-still. If I scream and his attention gets diverted he'll fall into the alley like a slashed kite and be smashed to bits. Die, you unfortunate fellow. What kind of concentration is this which does not even see an enemy? That kite is racing

along, it will cut down our kite. What colour is our kite? Where is it? The wretched thing is not to be seen. Look, do turn round and look. Don't let your kite be cut down. Look, look. I filled his eyes with my awareness.

His neck turned slightly. His hands began to move more deftly on the spool. He pulled and straightened the string, turned it slightly, raised his hand to loosen it, then began to pull back. He's seen it, he's seen it! The black kite retreated. His hands are moving towards his chest. Aha, the black kite has retreated still farther. But why is ours not seen? Clinging to the parapet, I hung over it. I'll see our kite come racing along. I'm determined to see it.

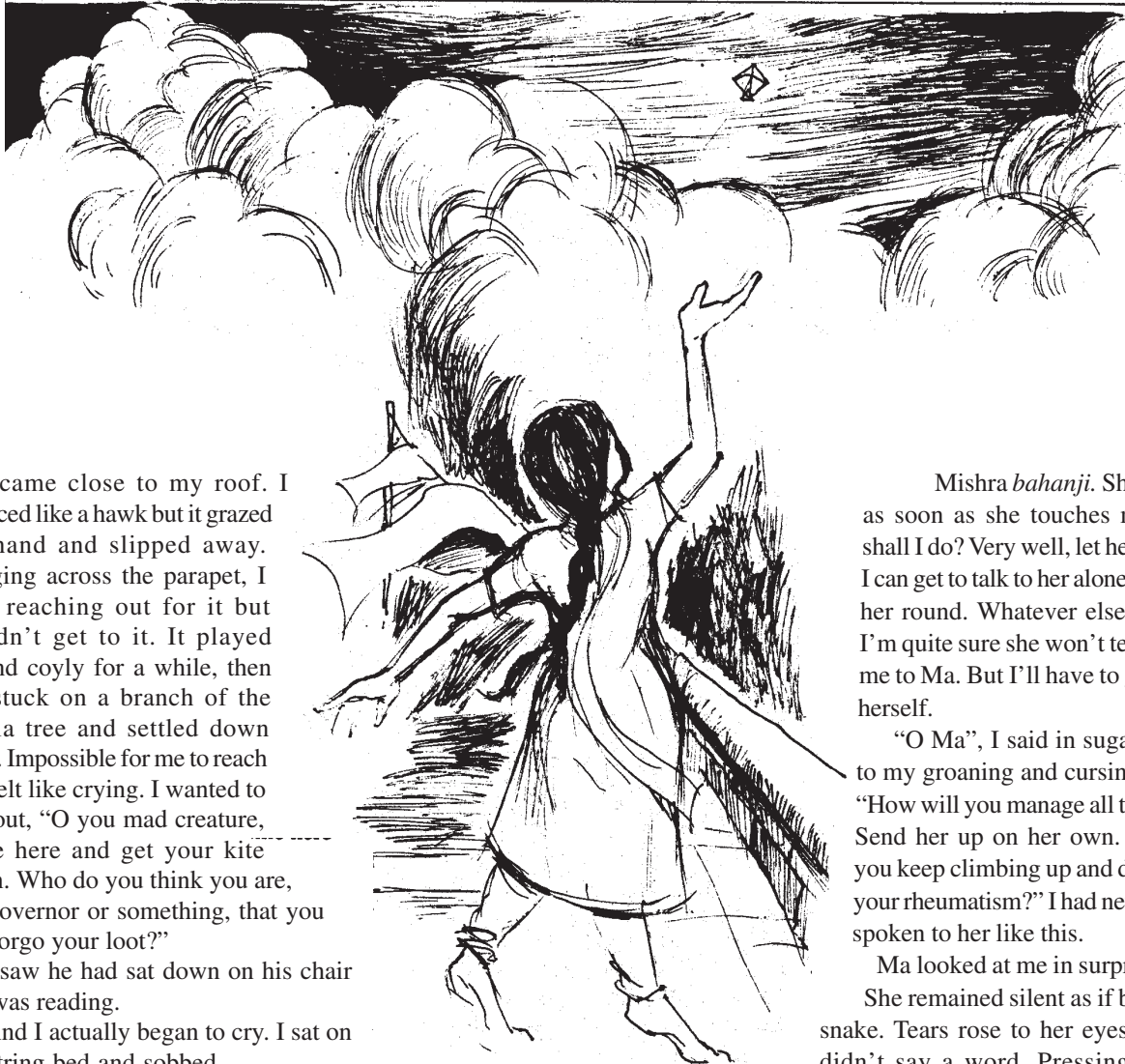
There it goes! I screamed. How lovely our kite was! Bright red and green. It came racing up and with one stroke cut the black kite's neck.

Then it came weaving along, towards the opposite rooftop. He was absorbed in rolling up the string. The rhythm of his feet had not altered. Nor had the inclination of his neck. Only his gaze that had hung in the sky was now focused ahead. On the kite. My eyes too were fixed on it. O what a lovely shiny new kite it was! He pulled in the string, now the kite was above his roof, now above his head, now in his hands. Now he will run to get the severed kite. It was falling slowly, now straight. The breeze was strong, was carrying it along in gusts, this way and that. Who knows whether it will fall in the alley or will get stuck in the tree on its way down? O god, let it fall in the alley so that he can run down and grab it.

Carefully he stepped down from the tank on to the roof. I clapped my hands. Now he will go and fetch the fallen kite.

But he didn't go down at all. He went into his room with his kite and spool.

Blockhead! Loony! If you won't grab it, I will. Why would anyone let go a captured kite? But the door is locked, how will I get into the alley? I'll have to grab it from here. Blown and slapped around by the breeze, the black and blue



kite came close to my roof. I pounced like a hawk but it grazed my hand and slipped away. Hanging across the parapet, I kept reaching out for it but couldn't get to it. It played around coyly for a while, then got stuck on a branch of the acacia tree and settled down there. Impossible for me to reach it. I felt like crying. I wanted to yell out, "O you mad creature, come here and get your kite down. Who do you think you are, the governor or something, that you can forgo your loot?"

I saw he had sat down on his chair and was reading.

And I actually began to cry. I sat on the string bed and sobbed.

I realised Ma had arrived when her fist struck my back.

"You wretch, here you are, playing coquette, while downstairs everything is at sixes and sevens."

I screamed aloud. "O, O, I've sprained my ankle, I can't walk, O, O."

Ma gave me another blow. "Die, you ill-fated creature. Can't you look where you're going? Now get up and come downstairs. Let me look at it and massage it." When she touched my foot I screamed again.

How was I to know how one walks with a sprained ankle? How much should I limp? If I put my foot to the ground, she'll know at once that there's no sprain at all.

"Be quiet, don't yell. Do you want to collect the whole neighbourhood or what?" Ma said, then stood, there, as if uncertain what to do next.

I cast a look across the way. Had the neighbourhood heard? Not at all. That idiot was sitting there, unmoved, reading away.

"Try to get up", Ma said, pulling at my arm.

I screamed so loudly that she lost her grip. "Have you broken a bone or what? O god, the wretch refuses to die. All right, sit still, I'll call Mishra *bahanji*. My legs are of no use anyway, am I to drag myself or you?"

Mishra *bahanji*. She'll know as soon as she touches me. What shall I do? Very well, let her come. If I can get to talk to her alone, I'll bring her round. Whatever else happens, I'm quite sure she won't tell tales on me to Ma. But I'll have to get her by herself.

"O Ma", I said in sugared tones to my groaning and cursing mother. "How will you manage all this alone? Send her up on her own. How can you keep climbing up and down with your rheumatism?" I had never before spoken to her like this.

Ma looked at me in surprise.

She remained silent as if bitten by a snake. Tears rose to her eyes. But she didn't say a word. Pressing her lips together, she swallowed her doubts, turned her back, and limped her way downstairs.

I will win over Mishra *bahanji*. After all, there is only one thing she wants of me. I will vow to her that from now on I will fix my mind on my studies. Just like Arjun. If only she saves me from Ma's beating just this one time. She will save me.

She would take some time yet to come up. I got up and, steadying my feet on the roof, began to dance just as he had danced. Self-enraptured. I felt as if the spool was in my hands and far above in the sky was a kite rising high, higher, ever higher. □