

The Crows' Way

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Translated from Hindi by
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SELF-interest is worship, self-interest is god. All else is but deception and fraud. Who is a friend and who a brother? Who is a father and who a mother? Who cares for the country, virtue or pride? The bread shall be buttered on both sides! False the talk of religion and duty! Empty knowledge and outward beauty! Who has a home and who a hearth? Hollow is love and callous the heart! Hymns and prayers, songs and chants! The arrow looks straight but flies aslant. Lonely the road and lonely the path. The saints look white but are black at heart. Well, may the founder, the all knowing one, fulfil every individual's self-interest. It so happened that once such a terrible drought struck the Thar desert for three continuous years that the rich could barely find a stem to clean their teeth while the poor animals lay dying all around. Unable to find food or water, they sat still, helpless, unmoving. Only the crows and vultures

knew when the life left the skeletons of those dumb animals. Never since creation had merciful providence been so kind to the crows and spread such a feast for them. After their stomachs were filled, they enjoyed themselves, idly pecking here and there.

The crows had got into the habit of spending the night near the dead animals. At sunrise they would bob up into the air and descend, cawing, to their meal. The air began to rot with the spreading stench. It became impossible for humans to draw breath in the vicinity, but the vultures and the crows had it made.

One day, a crow who was stuffed to capacity said to his spouse: "We have often heard the praises of the Mansarovar lake but have never got a chance to see it. It will take years for these corpses to be finished. What do you say—shall we take a short trip?"

His wife said: "If you've decided, why ask me? I don't feel like leaving this pleasant country, but if I disobey you, won't I go to hell?"

"Come on then," said the crow, pleased. "Auspicious is the moment when crows, who are children of the sun, decide to take wing, and the day comes early to their destination."

Even an ant reaches its destination once it sets out. And these were crows with wide pinions. On the third morning, they came to rest on the shores of the Mansarovar.

The pure waters rippled in the lap of the Himalayas. The bottom of the lake was clearly visible. Beautiful plants swayed, flowers bloomed, and creepers bowed to one's feet. Rows of white swans sang hymns together. Heaps of priceless pearls lay scattered around.

But those crows of Thar were not pleased by this sight. Oh for that silence, those empty wastes and those corpses! Those helpless animals, their bleeding wounds and their entangled entrails! Here, these poor swans live on pebbles. The praises they had heard were completely false. The memory of their motherland wrenched at their hearts. Can crows eat pebbles? They had just decided to fly back when a group of swans came up and surrounded them. The chief swan welcomed them, saying: "We are indeed fortunate to have guests like you. We cannot let you go without entertaining you."

"How will you entertain us?" replied the crow. "No one in our country eats pebbles."

The swans wondered from what land these beings had come who did not have an appetite for pearls.

"Look closely and you will see that these are not pebbles," said the chief politely. "We have never eaten anything besides pearls but if you prefer something else, I can offer you emeralds, rubies or..."

Making a face, the she-crow said: 'Take away your rubbish. Its stupid shine is dazzling my eyes. Water is found only in black clouds. I can't stand even the mention of the colour white. Get away from here, do—I'm feeling suffocated.'

At a sign from the chief, all the swans, except his mate, flew away. Then he said, looking closely at the crows' blackness: "We have spent years under the illusion that this is the most beautiful spot in the world but it seems we were wrong. Of which land are you the swans?"

"We are swans of Thar," replied the crow. "You cannot even dream of a place as lovely as that. Come and see it—all your dreams will be fulfilled."

The pair of swans replied: "If you are kind enough to take us, we will certainly visit that land."

When the chief and his mate took this decision, the whole tribe of swans clamoured to go along too. The chief explained to them: "First let the two of us go and see the beauty of that land. Be patient till we return. After that I will not forbid anyone to go."

The swans eventually agreed but they could not hold back their tears at parting. As each tear fell on the ground, it turned into a shining pearl.

Seated on the swans' backs, the crows set out for home. Before they alighted the swans began to feel suffocated by the stench. What kind of a land was this? Not a sign of a plant anywhere. Nothing but ugly sand dunes all around. Vultures and crows feasting on dead animals. Entrails scattered at every step. These low born crows had played them false!

"Why are you lost in thought?" asked the crow. "Take as many animals as you want. Nobody will dare challenge you as long as I am here."

The pair of swans thought it impossible to draw another breath

there. It was a sin even to look at such a sight. "You crows are welcome to this Thar land," said the she-swan. "We do not feel like staying here another moment."

So saying, the swans took wing. Heaven knows what signal those lowborn crows gave their friends but a whole troop of crows rose up and pursued the swans. But how could crows keep pace with swans? Exhausted, they soon returned. All birds are not as wise as are crows. How can poor swans know the pleasures of a diet of bleeding corpses?

Beguiled by the crows, they had left their land, but it was not so easy to get back safely. This is the price one pays for keeping company with crows. Darkness and rain descended. Lightning flashed, thunder growled and rain came down in torrents. Buffeted by the cold wind, they somehow managed to alight and take shelter under an old tree. They were drenched to the last feather.

They took refuge in the hollow trunk of a tree, and found some relief. But here a new problem confronted them. In the hollow lay a score or so of squealing rats, soaked to the skin. The pair of swans took pity on them. How can one bear to see another's suffering? They helped the rats as much as they could. By cowering in their plumage, the rats felt relieved.

The swans had to be punished for doing good to the rats. Can rats forsake their ways? As soon as they grew warm, they began to nibble at the feathers and continued nibbling all night long.

When day dawned, the swan said kindly: "We are going now. Stay well. We have done whatever we could for you."

Adding her blessing, the she-swan too climbed out of the hollow. Why were their bodies so light? When they looked back, they saw two heaps of

feathers lying in the hollow. Shedding tears, they looked at each other.

This was dreadful. They would rather have died than have had their wings clipped thus, but even death cannot be had for the asking. They had received the just reward for having trusted crows and pitied rats.

Who knows the ways of destiny? Not even the sun. The pair of swans was sitting on the roadside, dejected, with hanging heads, when the son of a wealthy Selh passed by on his way back from business. His bride was due to arrive soon from her parents' house. Though young, he had picked up many secrets and skills of trade yet he was quite eccentric and idiosyncratic. As he walked along, he gestured with his hands and talked to himself. He held a golden stick and on his shoulder hung a bundle and a water flask. He was wheat complexioned and glowed with health.

Lost in his own thoughts, he passed by the swans yet did not see them. The she-swan, who had been hungry and thirsty two days, said pleadingly: "Passerby, will you go on without a backward look? Won't you hear the sorrows of us unfortunate swans?"

He started at the voice and looked back. Smiling, he came up and said: "I didn't notice. Well, you are swans, but what has happened to your plumes?"

The swans tearfully related the whole story and then said: "Please give us some water. Our throats are parched."

He gave them water in his cupped hands, and stroked their mutilated bodies. Suddenly, he remembered that he had some grain with him, so he offered it to them on his palm.

Shaking their long necks, the swans said: "We cannot eat any grain besides pearls and rubies."

Laughing, that whimsical boy replied: "Well remembered! I have

plenty of rubies and pearls. I'll write them up to your account. When I come to Mansarovar you can repay me."

The swans felt much refreshed after drinking water. The she-swam said: "Certainly, but even if we gave you carts full of pearls we can never repay our debt to you. But how are we to reach there?"

The trader's son replied enthusiastically: "Don't worry. I am the only son of a wealthy Seth. After my bride arrives, I will take you in a bullock cart. Come along with me now,"

Innocent swans as they were, they had trusted even the crows, so why should they doubt him?

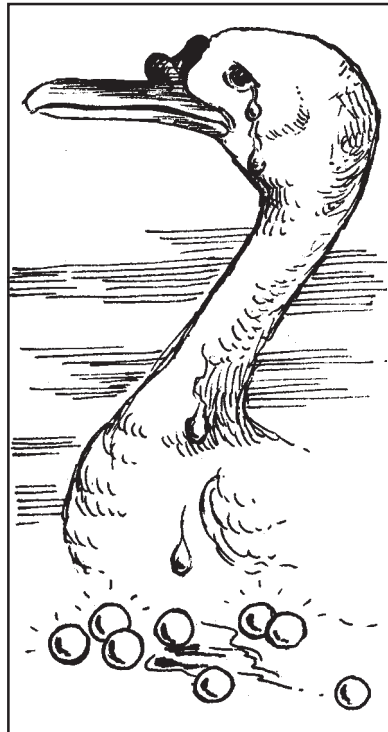
The moneylender's son fed them pearls, then seated them on his shoulders and went on his way, humming a tune.

When he reached home, the Seth was very cross at the sight of the swans, but he had to bow to his son's will. He explained to his father that the pearls fed to the swans would not go waste. His father was not familiar with the new tricks of the trade.

When the bride arrived she began to look after the swans. She was a very simple, sensible and gentle girl, extremely beautiful, glowing pink and white. She stroked and fed the swans with her own hands. She loved them as if they were the fruit of her womb. Such was the magic of her hands that their wings began to grow again. Soft and silky. She kept them with her at night. Her kisses and the touch of her breasts made the swans grow with redoubled vigour. Their feathers sprouted as though someone was drawing them out. She bathed them every day in her own bath and held them to her bosom. With such treatment even a stone would have sprouted wings, and they were living swans. Their wings fluttered like the radiant beams of the sun. Then the swans took several long flights into

the sky and dropped back into the bride's lap.

At parting, the pair of swans shed many tears. The bride too wept aloud. Amazingly, as the bride's and the swans' tears mingled, they turned into priceless pearls. Seeing this strange mingling of tears the Seth's son smiled and said to his wife: "Enough, now. After many months these swans have



got a chance to return home. Don't create an ill omen by crying so much."

His parents were standing nearby. The Seth rebuked his son, saying: "You idiot! Are tears an ill omen? Don't you see these pearls? What better omen can there be, my son? Let them weep freely. Weeping lightens the heart. Let no one stop till I give the word."

The pair of swans were anxious to repay their debt. They kept shedding tears through three days and three nights. Four times the number of pearls they had eaten lay sparkling in the courtyard. This whim of the whimsical boy had turned out very

well. Each pearl was worth one and a quarter lakh rupees. The bride's entrance into this house had proved auspicious indeed.

God is always on the side of the innocent. The mad son had done well to feed pearls to the swans! Now he would never be rebuked.

From the bride's bosom, the pair of swans flew straight up into the sky. The beat of their pinions once again sent pearls showering down on the Seth's house.

How the poor things had suffered, all on account of those dastardly crows! Whenever a crow settled on the wall, the Seth's son would drive it away. One day, the Seth grew irritated and said: "What is this madness, my son? You should feed these crows with your own hands. If they had not deceived the swans, would all this wealth have been ours? Do have a little sense."

"You keep your sense to yourself. Don't give it to me." With that, the half mad son altogether stopped talking to his father. With great difficulty the daughter-in-law reconciled him to his father. On the son's insistence a servant was specially appointed to drive away the crows. All day he did nothing but brandish a stick at the crows.

Well, the Seth's household went on in this way for three years. One day the Seth said to his son: "Son, how long can we keep living like this, off our capital?"

The son got angry and said sharply: "You have turned the whole village against you with your constant meaningless fault-finding. Why don't you go abroad to trade? That will kill two birds with one stone. You can scream and shout as much as you like, but I will not stir from here till my wife conceives."

"Is it so easy to conceive? All the priests who have looked at your horoscopes have said that this is not the time for you to have children.

Those swans must be missing you sorely. Why don't you go and visit them at Mansarovar?"

This arrow struck home. Dancing with joy, the son said: "Oh, I had completely forgotten that. Poor things, they must be withering away with missing me."

At an auspicious moment the Seth harnessed up the big bullock and sent his son off to Mansarovar. The daughter-in-law stood watching with sad eyes and soon her husband disappeared from sight.

Rolling along, the bullock cart reached Mansarovar in the fifth month. The chief swan came swift as the wind to greet his protector. He fanned him with his pinions and rolled in his lap. The she-swan, who was playing with her children, also came flying up. She asked about his wife and his parents. When she asked about his children he smiled and said: "My wife has not yet conceived, yet my father forcibly sent me off to visit you."

The she-swan said: "We have always been awaiting you. Had you not come, we would have visited you soon."

In a short while, the whole tribe of swans came flocking up. All of them thanked him profusely for having looked after the chief pair. How beautiful and innocent were these swans! Washed in milk. Pure minded as the water of a lake. The earth lay covered with gems. He felt ashamed even to speak of filling the bullock cart.

The she-swan kept reproaching him for not having brought his wife. Since he had brought the bullock cart, why had he come alone? He agreed. She would surely have been overjoyed to see the sights of Mansarovar. He promised to bring her the next time.

The she-swan entertained him royally. She fed him pudding and sweetmeats soaked in clarified butter.

She cooked him lotus stems with rubies. The Selh's son enjoyed himself, eating his fill.

When evening fell, they sat down to talk and overheard a pair of ruddy geese talking on a wishing tree nearby. The she-geese said to her male: "Tell me some news."

"Of myself or of another?"

"Oh, not of yourself. It's more fun to hear about others."

"I am very wise in the affairs of others", said the he-geese. "What I predict of them never proves false. Pay attention to what I say. Today the son of a wealthy Seth has come to visit the chief swan. Had he not looked after them, they would have died the death of a dog. Today they have a chance to return the favour."

The two swans and the young man also began to pay close attention. The goose went on to say: "This young man's house is full of wealth but he has no child. Tonight is an auspicious night. If he meets his wife at midnight, a son will be conceived. When he's an infant his spittle will turn to priceless pearls and when he grows up a ruby worth one and a half lakhs will fall every time he coughs."

The swan was thrilled. "Do you hear this?" he asked the Seth's son.

"Yes, but what's the use?" sighed the Seth's son. "Not even in a dream can one reach there by midnight."

"Whether or not one can reach in a dream one can know only if one has a dream, but I will take you to your wife's room before midnight!" the swan assured him. "I know I can do it. Close your eyes and sit on my back. If I don't reach there swifter than a dream, you can cut off my wings."

Heaven knows why that mad son of a Seth believed the swan. Eager to meet his wife, the she-swan decided to accompany them. Up they flew, the she-swan above, the he-swan below. What chance had the power of distance against them?

Before midnight the three reached

her bedroom door. In her dreams the daughter-in-law was in her husband's arms when she awoke to a knock on her door and the sound of his voice. When she opened the door, there stood her husband, smiling, in the moon-light. Can the full moon create such an illusion? The pair of swans stood by, fluttering their wings.

All of them went into the bedroom. The swan told the woman all that they had heard from the ruddy geese. Then she lit a lamp of clarified butter. What need for shame before innocent birds? Husband and wife lost themselves in the worship of Eros while the swans looked on. At the auspicious moment, the wife conceived.

If he stayed on, his father would get angry; so the three of them left before dawn. The wife's dream had come true. May these swans be blessed in all their future lives for having fulfilled her heart's desire.

But do not crows in human shape live in every habitation? If everyone's heart's desire could be thus fulfilled, who would bother about their cawings? When a knowing midwife announced the good news that the daughter-in-law was pregnant, all the crows of the village gathered cawing loudly. The Seth had settled a great many disputes in his day! When his own affairs came to be looked into, he would learn a lesson! The wise man can see a fire on a mountain, but not the fire at his own feet!

One day this cawing reached the Seth's ears, as it was bound to. Three or four Selhs who were his rivals found a good chance to get back at him. He loudly proclaimed that this was an out-and-out He. He would ask his daughter-in-law and find out the truth.

The elders said that it surely would not take many years to ask the daughter-in-law. But her state was clearly visible. Can a swelling stomach be hidden? A woman can keep neither a secret nor a child hidden. In the ninth

month the child was bound to come forth. Then he could take his own sweet time to find out who had been gotten it

This sent the Seth into a rage, and he went straight to his daughter-in-law. She had clearly heard the cawing from a distance. Patting her head, the father-in-law said: "You are like my daughter. Do not hide anything from me. Tell me what this rumour means."

The daughter-in-law had no sin in her heart. She told the truth. The Seth's head reeled. In a trembling voice he said: "Daughter, where is the human being who is fit to believe this? They have been looking for such an opportunity and now they won't let it escape them."

The daughter-in-law's heart sank. Would falsehood triumph over truth? She said: "Do you also disbelieve me then?"

Shaking his head the Seth said: "Of what use will it be for me alone to believe you? People's understanding is of a very different nature."

The Seth tried his best to convince the elders but not one of them was willing to believe such a nonsensical tale. Could any sensible person see sense in this story? The headman said: "Sethji, many families have been uprooted as a result of the stern justice meted out by you. All those people are ready today to settle scores with you. Listen to me, admit the fault and throw out your daughter-in-law. If her face is blackened we will let the matter drop. Otherwise, it is not in my hands to save the honour of your house."

"Honour is in the hands of the one who gives it," said the Seth mildly. "I am ready to pay any fine you mention but don't inflict such punishment on my beloved daughter-in-law. She will die as soon as she hears this sentence."

The elders were men of understanding. They calmly replied that no one in this world is immortal.

Everyone must die, sooner or later. Enough if one can maintain one's honour during one's lifetime. Either he must throw out his daughter-in-law or he must be ready to be declared an outcaste by the community.

When old shoes tear, new ones must be put on. But how can justice meted out by the "river of justice" be disputed? The daughter-in-law wept and begged and pleaded, but the Seth's heart was not touched. He caught her by the hand and threw her out on the lonely road. A girl thrown out by her in-laws cannot find refuge with her own parents either. That auspicious moment had proven poisonous for her.

Lonely the road, lonely the forest. All the ways behind her were closed. Ahead there was no place for her. Towards what kind of death should she advance?

Under the sun by day and the moon by night, she finally followed her shadow back to her in-laws' house. Spitting at her, the Seth growled: "Don't you feel ashamed to show your blackened face here?"

Sobbing, she said: "I have done nothing for which I need feel ashamed."

"Then whose child are you carrying?"

"Your son's."

Irritated, the Seth said: "That pretence of yours won't wash here. If you were so eager to live in this house you should have controlled your desires. There is no place here for whores like you."

The daughter-in-law folded her hands and said: "Tell me, where can I, a woman, go on my own?"

"You should have asked your lover that," taunted the Seth. With that, he slammed the door and bolted it. The same door that had once opened to her with music and song was today closed to her forever. To cry and plead was of no avail. If she opened her eyes, she would see

nothing but that house. So she turned around and closed her eyes and walked in whichever



direction her feet took her. May those demonic crows be destroyed. Heaven knew for the sins of which birth they had taken revenge on her through the swans. Who knows how much blackness these blackcrows will plaster on whose face?

Eyes still closed, she was passing by a potter's hut when the potter woman caught her hand and said: "My dear woman, where are you going with eyes closed like this?"

Without opening her eyes the daughter-in-law said: "I myself don't know, so how can I tell you?"

Stroking her cheeks affectionately, the potter woman said: "No need to say another word. You are my daughter and I am your mother. It is only to a mother's doorstep that one can go with eyes closed."

What does a blind person need but two eyes? This sympathy made her tears overflow. Her eyes opened. She saw an old woman standing in front of her. A wrinkled face, dim eyes, a toothless mouth, and pure white hair.

Walking ahead with closed eyes had taken her somewhere after all. With open eyes she may well have fallen into some pit.

Three years back the potter had died. He had fathered seven sons. All of them were married and the house was filled with their children, but it seemed empty without a daughter. Now, the coming of a daughter enriched the house. The mother's joy knew no bounds. As if youth had once more bloomed in her quaking body.

The house of a potter is nowhere near as comfortable as the house of a Seth, yet the days passed by. Because of the old woman, everyone

in the house took care of her. She, too, did as much work as she could, grinding, milking, sweeping and so on. The sun which rises must set and rise again. The ninth month arrived. The old woman hovered around her solicitously all day long. One midnight she felt pains and awoke the mother. Before dawn a son was born to her. The old woman cut the cord, beat a copper tray and then began to dance for joy like a child.

While the baby was being massaged, saliva trickled from his mouth and immediately turned into a pearl. The old woman could not believe her eyes. What were these smooth white pebbles he was bringing up? Then the girl told her the whole story.

When the potter's sons heard the story, they could not sit still but rushed off to the goldsmith. What does a goldsmith care for close relations? He would even cut off his mother's breasts. Smiling sarcastically he said: "Who are you trying to fool? If you had consulted me before lying you would have cooked up a more plausible tale. Tell me plainly from whom you have stolen this pearl—otherwise I shall take you before the king."

"Why should we lie?" said the potter's eldest son. "If you don't believe us, you can come and see for yourself."

It was an unbelievable story; yet the goldsmith reluctantly went along. Disbelief cannot alter the truth even after seeing it with one's own eyes. The goldsmith found it difficult to believe in the phenomenon.

He agreed to buy each pearl for a hundred gold coins and off he went rejoicing. The potter's family were also overjoyed but the daughter-in-law was lost in thoughts of her past. Where was her husband? Where were her in-laws and where were her parents? Little had she dreamt that she

could ever be in such a situation. Not even in broad daylight can one look beyond the present moment. Had she foreseen this, would she have let her husband depart that night? But greed for wealth and fear of his parents' anger had proved too strong for him.

In this world of mortals everyone is obsessed with self. Only if one takes time off from this concern can one think of others. The sight of the phenomenal child had stirred up a tempest in the goldsmith's breast. If he bought each pearl for a hundred gold coins he would get a handsome profit. This would be a regular source of steady income. In one day he could save enough for seven generations of descendants. But greed is a bottomless pit. It seemed to him that God had answered his prayers. If he could get hold of this child, the stain of his sonlessness would be eradicated and besides, all the pearls would be his own! He would soon gain influence with the king. How could such brilliant ideas have occurred to him had it not been for the grace of God!

Nothing is impossible for those on whom God looks kindly. The goldsmith's wife got into the habit of visiting the potter's wife every day on the pretext of churning whey, and while there, she would spend some time playing with the child. One day, while playing with him she slipped him under her veil and went straight to her husband. He was already waiting on a swift camel. He sat on the first hump and his wife with the child on the second. The camel raced away at the speed of a sandstorm.

The goldsmith stopped the camel before the king's palace. He went into the hall and bowed his head seven times at the feet of the king who was seated on his throne. Folding his hands up to the elbows, he cried out: "O King of Bharwanda, I have finally abandoned hope of God's help and

have come to you for protection. Save me your highness, save me!"

The king reassured him and asked why he needed protection. The goldsmith explained that he had had five children but a witch who was after him had devoured all five of them. Where could he go leaving his ancestral home? He had wept and wailed but continued to endure the torture. But the mother's heart gave way. She had stopped eating and drinking so finally they had sought refuge at the king's feet.

They could not bear to abandon this sixth child to the witch. He was willing to accept any punishment for this fault. The blood-thirsty witch was sure to pursue him even here.

When he heard the goldsmith's woes the king's eyes grew moist. Silence fell within the hall. With his own hands the king wiped the goldsmith's tears. He gave strict orders to the prime minister not to let the guard slacken at any time of the day or night. If any strange woman was seen she must be produced in court. The guards of the four gates were given a detailed description of the witch's appearance. Having gained the protection of the state the goldsmith had nothing to fear. The following day he built a three-storeyed mansion and began to live in luxury. Every day he presented the king with a pearl. The king began to respect the goldsmith more highly than he did the prime minister. His influence in the court may well be imagined!

Meanwhile, the mother of the child and the potter's family were sunk in sorrow. The Sethani wept until all her tears dried up. If only her son had not been so unusual that his saliva turned to pearls! The potter's sons too wept copiously. Had they not lost a fortune? The seven brothers conducted a thorough search but the goldsmith was not to be found. They

enquired from everyone they met, even from animals and birds, rocks and stones, trees and plants. But the goldsmith seemed to have vanished into thin air. She wandered from door to door in search of the child, because of whom had lost her home.

One day she plucked up her courage and returned to her in-laws' house. The Seth's son had returned long since, bringing a cartload of pearls with him. He had been enraged when he heard the justice done by the "river of justice". He shouted and swore, saying again and again that it was true that he had come home at midnight but had returned the same night for fear of his father's wrath. Neither his father nor the elders could believe this impossibility. One of them remarked that family honour cannot be patched up in this way. He should have consulted the elders before concocting this story.

"If I had my way I would give each of those good-for-nothing elders a sound thrashing," said that eccentric boy, "Why should I be cowed down by any of them?"

Annoyed, the elders walked off, hurling abuses. Looking at his father the whimsical son said: "I stayed away just six months and in that time you turned out the poor innocent woman. Now tell me with whom shall I sleep at night in the bedroom?"

This coarse language made the father ashamed. He turned his back and said: "Don't worry, son. If you like I'll get you married this evening. There will be no shortage of brides for you."

"What if you turn her out when I next go out on business? Who knows what you will do next? I am not going to live with you anymore. If you think I will give you even one pearl of those I have brought, you can think again."

He would hear not another word. After the second month he separated from his father and built a house for himself.

The water of one well may be brackish and that of another sweet. The water of one tank may be heavy and that of another light. Water of any kind does quench thirst. So also, even though different in looks and in temperament, the pleasure of the bed is the same with all women. What if old memories sometimes disturb one a little!

The Seth's son had accustomed himself to sleeping with his second wife when suddenly, one day, the first one appeared at his door. As soon as he recognised her, the eccentric husband came up and said: "What have you come here for after wandering all over the city? I am not such a fool as you think. Go away, you are of no use to me now."

The woman could hardly believe her ears. Was this her husband who was speaking thus to her? She had to express her feelings. "Do you too blame me even though you know the truth?" she asked.

"Why not? Do you think I am afraid of you? When my father threw you out you should have broken your head on his threshold and died there. I can't drink water that has been defiled by all and sundry."

Stretching out her hand towards his feet, she said: "No one except you has ever touched this water. Today I do not even have with me the child for whose sake I suffered so much. In his greed for the pearls, a goldsmith stole the child. I am not covetous of your bed. There is plenty of work to be done in your house. Let me wash utensils and scrub floors in your house and eat the stale leftovers. I was born a woman as a punishment for the sins of a former birth. These human beings will not let me live without the support of a husband."

So saying, she burst into tears but her eccentric husband remained unmoved. Forgetful of their former love, he said contemptuously: "Don't try to take me in with your

uncontrollable tears. If you stay here you will only envy the new wife and find fault with her. A woman should not spend even one night outside the house but you have been wandering about heaven knows where for such a long time. No responsible man could ever trust your word. Far from staying in this house, you cannot even stay in this village."

When her husband spoke thus, she could not find it in her heart to speak with him further. She wiped her eyes and silently walked away, as if she had awakened from a dream. Strangely enough, however, she did not suffer as much this time as she had the first time she was turned from this door. Sita was exiled only once but this Sita suffered exile three times. All alone. Without even her husband's support.

Yet how could she cease searching for the son born of her womb? Does a mother's heart ever accept defeat? She wandered from door to door, with only the sun, the moon and the stars for companions, yet she could not find her son. Finally, her wanderings brought her to the king's court. This was what the goldsmith feared. With folded hands he went to the king and said: "The witch has come. Now my son's life is at your feet."

What is there to fear once one is at the king's feet! The gift of a pearl every day had also taken effect. The mother was not even given a hearing. The executioners were ordered to impale her without an instant's delay.

The wise prime minister then advised that one impaling was too mild a punishment for a wicked witch. She should be impaled every day.

The prostitute Lakhu's youth was waning. She would happily pay a lakh of rupees for this whore. The state treasury must be replenished, after all.

This idea pleased the king. Lakhu was a good judge of beauty. She

paid one and a half lakhs without any haggling. The prime minister got his cut and was praised for his good sense while Lakhu got beauty and youth in exchange for her money.

The setting sun does not cease to give light. So too, Lakhu even in the decline of her youth did not cease to be beautiful. But when she saw the Sethani she said: "Seeing you has dispelled my illusion that I am beautiful. But the glory of such beauty as yours lies in its being shared by all. To tie it to one peg is to degrade it."

It took the Sethani some time to understand Lakhu's meaning. So far, she had encountered nothing but contempt. At least, Lakhu had considered her of some value. Fearfully, the Sethani said: "If I follow this sinful path I will be an outcast even from hell. This life is already ruined. Why ruin the next life as well?"

Lakhu felt like laughing. How naive women are! They spend their lives under this misconception, and die in this misconception. Holding back her laughter, she said: "What better path can there be in this human society? Earlier I, too, was under this misconception. It's no use my trying to convince you of anything right now because you are not in a state of mind to be convinced. Time and trouble are the best teachers. I have ten other girls here. No scripture could be more instructive than their life stories but one needs good sense to learn from them. I will give you a chance to acquire good sense. Never mind my one and a half lakh rupees. You go and meet your parents, your in-laws and your mother's people. Satisfy yourself. After that you won't need much convincing."

"What if I don't come back to you?" asked the Sethani.

Lakhu smiled. "That's up to you. You are free to do as you like. I trade in women's bodies, not their lives."

The Sethani gazed in wonder at

Lakhu. Such words from a prostitute's mouth! It was as if a ripe boil had been pierced with a sharp needle. Tears began to pour from her eyes. Lakhu could not stand the sight of a woman's tears. Irritated, she said: "I have seen so many women crying that I am tired of it. In this declining age I don't have the strength to endure the sight any more. Don't cry. It is these useless tears which are our undoing. Woman has no greater enemy than these tears."

"Till I tell you the story behind these tears my heart will not be lightened," said the Sethani in a choked voice.

"But what is the need to lighten your heart?" broke in Lakhu. "I have heard so many sob stories that I really can't bear any more. Anyway, if you want, you can tell me the story when you come back here. That is when you and I will understand each other. I know the sorrows of all women's hearts without hearing them. You can go now. I have allowed this option to every girl who has come to me. Only three could not get rid of their misconceptions, so they committed suicide. All the rest came straight here. Not one of them deceived me. What has a courtesan's house to do with fraud and double dealing? There are enough households to contain that filth."

Gradually the mist began to clear away from before the Sethani's eyes. "I don't feel like going away from here," she said.

"No, I can't agree to that," replied Lakhu. "Never do anything or get anything done by force. Come back only if you feel like it. Don't feel indebted to me. I had the money, so I paid it. The doors of this house are open to you at any hour of the day or night. If you feel like coming, don't hesitate. If you do not feel like it, fine." The Sethani left with a heavy heart, but she thought that surely her parents would not turn her away.

Blood is thicker than water. A son can turn out badly but a mother's heart will never change. A mother moulds the child of her own flesh and blood, shelters it in her body for nine months. Yet she felt a strange hesitation in going to her mother's house, so she found her way to her maternal grandparents' house. Everyone there had already heard of her misdoings. Such tales travel faster than the wind. When her maternal uncle and aunt set their eyes on her, they turned as pale as if a tiger had suddenly appeared at their door. At first they refused to recognise her. When she introduced herself they did their utmost to insult and humiliate her. She had not expected to hear such taunts.

"Kindred and relations are also governed by custom," said the uncle, as he fed his dogs with pieces of bread, "One cannot go against society. Didn't you come across a well or tank on your way here? In fact, you could have settled the matter at home with a length of rope. Why did you have to come here and show us your ill-omened countenance?"

A dog leapt up for a piece of bread. Her uncle stepped backwards and rebuked the dog, "*Dhurre, dhurre!*"

To the wise, a word is enough.

The Sethani turned away and did not look back at her grandparents' house. But she was sure that her mother would embrace her, stroke her head and kiss her forehead and cheeks as before.

There, too, the daughter's hopes were belied. Her mother recognised her at once but no maternal affection swelled in her bosom.

Her face distorted by anger, she said: "I wish I had given birth to a stone instead of you! Accursed creature, why have you brought your blackened face here? It looks as if even death hates you. If you had the least amount of shame or modesty left, you would go and drown yourself in

a drop of water. It is I who am ashamed that I bore and bred you.”

Having thus cast aside her daughter, the mother began to call out to the stray dogs who ran up wagging their tails. The mother fed them with pieces of fried bread. No little merit may be earned this way on a moonless night. The daughter was struck speechless by her mother’s words. Such humiliation where she had hoped for food and shelter! She silently turned to leave by the path she had come.

Hearing his wife’s voice, the master of the house emerged from his prayer room. Telling the rosary he said: “Whom were you scolding? How many times have I told you not to lose your temper with the women who come begging for why?”

“So you think she’s begging for why?” said his wife dryly. “My good man! Don’t you recognise your own daughter? Yes, this is your precious daughter - take a good look at her.”

The mention of his daughter caused coals to bum and smoulder in the father’s breast. Grinding his teeth he said: “How did she dare to come here? Didn’t you have shoes on your feet? Why didn’t you give her a dozen blows with a shoe?”

The daughter turned and came back. Smiling, she said: “Fulfil that desire too if you like.”

When the father could not pluck up the courage to beat her with shoes, the mother said: “You shameless hussy, how dare you stand there and grin at us?”

Then, turning to her husband, she said: “If shoes had had any force earlier, we would not have had to see this day. It’s your pampering that spoils her.”

He was not one to suffer a false reproach. Pausing in his rosary chanting he retorted: “If she hadn’t got too much of her mother’s petting she would never have gone to the bad.”

While her parents indulged in mutual recriminations, the daughter quietly walked away. Now she had no choice except death or Lakhu. She had not been born of her own choice. Why then should she beg a boon of death? In this wide world, she saw no glimmer of hope except in one house. Without stopping a moment on the way, she made straight for Lakhu’s house. She knocked loudly on the door. Opening the door, Lakhu said: “I knew you would soon return, and I had full faith in your understanding. Now I have found a true heir. My worries are over. None of these girls has a mind to match yours.”

What tune was this that Lakhu was singing? Was it a compliment or an insult? But there was no hint of a taunt in her manner.

Her words were simple and straight forward. The Sethani said: “If you knew that why did you let me go?”

Closing the door, Lakhu said: “It was necessary for you to go. One cannot understand reality merely by hearing about it. Now perhaps there will be no need to explain things to you. Have a bath and get some rest. I’ll hear your story tonight after dinner.”

The Sethani made no reply. Many tempests arose in her breast. No matter how wise a man may be, not in a thousand lifetimes can he fathom the tumults of a woman’s life and her mind. Even if all the men in the world get together and set themselves to the task, nothing will come to hand.

After dinner, the Sethani said: “Now it doesn’t matter to me whether I tell you my story or not. My indigestion has disappeared of its own accord.”

Several girls were also there sitting around. One said: “This is the custom of the house. The second time one crosses the threshold of this house, one has to relate one’s life

story. Then the clerk records all the details in a register.”

Sighing deeply, the

Selhani said: “Had a crow’s shadow not fallen athwart my fate, my story would have been very different.”

“No, daughter, that is not true,” said Lakhu shaking her head. “It just seems that way to us. Though our life stories are no different from each other, they appear different to us. All the women in this world have but one life story-they are robbed by men and bear the consequences of that robbery throughout their lives. No woman is untouched by this experience. But the illusions of home and family prevent her from understanding this truth.”

Then the Sethani related her story from the beginning - how the crows of Thar desert had deceived the swans of Mansarovar, how the swans had got caught in a storm and sought shelter in a hollow tree, how the mice had nibbled at their wings, how her husband had brought those wingless swans home with him, how after her wedding she had cared for those swans and fed them with gems, how, on being stroked and caressed by her and held to her breast, their wings had grown, how her husband had gone to visit the swans but had come back to her at midnight on hearing the ruddy goose’s words, how the village elders had judged her falsely and got her thrown out of her in-laws’ house, how the potter woman had given her shelter and the goldsmith’s wife had abducted her son- she related every incident that had occurred up to the time that she had met Lakhu.

This time, not a tear came to her eyes. She had not forgotten Lakhu’s exasperation at tears. Weeping changes nothing, it merely gives one false consolation. Now she



understood the meaning of Lakhu's exasperation.

After hearing the whole story, Lakhu said: "Daughter, all religion, devotion, philanthropy, meditation, non-violence, ritual, customs, traditions and norms are false illusions. If anything is true, it is the crow's way. All the world's scholars, ascetics, wise men, priests and pilgrims are followers of the crow's way. One's own self interest is most important. Everything else is a fraud or an obstacle. The poison of the crow's cunning is visible throughout the world. The village elders dealt unjustly with you though you carried your husband's hope in your womb. But if you glance through our chronicles here, you may understand something about the doings of men. One woman has her father's hope in her womb, another the seed of her brother or uncle or brother-in-law or nephew. They share the pleasure but the pain is borne by the woman alone. She has no way of escape. Nature cares nothing for relations and kindred. When the secret becomes known the man gets angry and runs at you to bite you. It is only here that you can see how much blackness, wrought of men's hands, lies behind this bright sunshine. Women in families are forbidden to see this blackness but the rules and morals of families are immoral here, and their immorality is our chief morality. When one comes here one must forget the rotten norms of the family. To refuse to forget them is to suffer unnecessary pain. The deeds that they do in secret are here done openly and unhesitatingly. Whoever brings cash along with him is entitled to be one's bedfellow. No relations of caste or community, kith or kin, father or son, brother or nephew are acknowledged here. Only when one learns this can one keep faith with this profession. At first it is a little difficult to swallow all this but soon one gets used to it. It is not easy to get over the conditioning of family. I, too, took a long time to attain this understanding. I suffered a lot as a

result of my father's doings. I raised an outcry but no one paid heed to my reality. Finally, when I took to the flesh trade I came to my senses and the veil of illusion was lifted."

In this way, Lakhu explained the essence of a new Gita, and, in a daze, like Arjun, the Sethani listened. Then the Sethani at Lakhu's bidding vowed never to stain the honour of this profession.

The following night the prime minister came to Lakhu's brothel. He had been pleased with the Sethani when he first saw her in the king's court. Today, on receiving Lakhu's invitation, he mounted his horse and came riding up.

Decked and adorned, the Sethani sat waiting. Lamps of clarified butter were lit. The meaning of her wedding night swam in the glow of the lamps. That had been a night of happiness and so was this. But the two kinds of happiness were as far apart as the earth and the sky.

The prime minister was in a drunken state and the Sethani was not at all used to the reek of liquor. Her head swam when the fumes smote her. She began to feel sick. She begged the prime minister to come the next night but he refused. She had been bought with money.

The prime minister enjoyed the cohabitation very much. He gave the Sethani his ring studded with priceless gems. Can a single night be valued at such a high price?

The prime minister had come after dark and he returned before dawn. After he left, Lakhu came into the room. For a while the two women looked into one another's eyes. The night waited for them to speak. Finally Lakhu's lips opened. "You will feel disgusted for the first few nights," she said. "But after that you'll have no trouble."

But the stink of liquor makes me feel sick," the Sethani replied in a low voice. "It would be good if such drunkards could be forbidden to come."

"That is not in our control. In time, you will get used to this stink, but there are many other foul smells which will pursue you, even in dreams. Try to stay away from them. Many great men will speak of marriage. They will pretend love for you. Don't fall into that trap. This prime minister has five wives. He is well versed in professing love for women. Tonight you have been invited to a king's palace. The king has sixteen wives. Surprised? For these men there are no limits and no restrictions. Well, you need not lag behind in pretending love, but don't fall into their swamp. This is my special advice to you. Neither should you hate anyone nor love anyone."

When the first stars appeared, a couch drawn by sixteen horses came to fetch the Sethani. Lakhu herself adorned her with pearls and diamonds. To the musical rapping of hooves the coach sped along and came to a hall beneath the king's bedroom window. Four slave girls, waving fans over her head, escorted her to the golden bed.

In a short while the king staggered in, dead drunk. Supported by the slave girls he reached the bed and fell flat on the velvet cushions. Two slave girls began to press his hands and feet.

This drama did not remind the Sethani of any past night. She watched in amazement all that was going on.

Later at night, the king suddenly remembered sex. He began to move his hands around. One slave girl stood at his head, the other at his feet. The Sethani shrank back, feeling embarrassed. "These are my special slavegirls," stammered the king. "No need to feel shy before them - they always wait on me all night."

The king wanted to say something more but he could not continue. He hiccupped and vomited all over the Sethani's lace. Her unbuttoned blouse, her breasts and face were covered with vomit. Screwing up her face in disgust, the Sethani at once descended from the

bed. The king vomited some more and then collapsed on the bed. The two slave girls changed the bedding and the king's clothes. They washed his beard and moustache. But the king did not come back to consciousness.

When the Sethani wanted to wash her face and change her clothes, a slavegirl whispered: "To show disgust at the Giver of Bread's vomit is to invite death. Didn't Lakhu tell you that?"

Is not showing disgust equivalent to not reeling it? The Sethani's head was splitting. "Death does not come on invitation," she said angrily. "It strikes suddenly and unexpectedly, it spares neither king nor subject."

Then, despite the slavegirl's remonstrances, she washed her face again and again. She washed her blouse. When the blouse was half-dry she plucked up courage and said: "His majesty is unconscious. What is the use of my staying on? In any case, I am not feeling well tonight. Send me home."

The slavegirls gazed at her in horror. "Who knows when the Giver of Bread may wake up?" said one. "It seems you haven't yet learned the qualities required to wait upon a king."

What could the Sethani say? Repeating to herself Lakhu's advice, she stood still like a puppet.

Day dawned, yet the king's eyes did not open. When the day was well advanced he finally woke from his drunken stupor. Looking from one slavegirl to the other his eyes fell on the Selhani. Yawning, he asked, "Who is this new girl?"

One of the slave girls reminded him of all that had happened in the night. He could not recollect any of it but sitting up with a jerk he said: "If that was the case, why didn't you wake me up? Lakhu sent me a gift and you paid no heed to it?"

Asking forgiveness, the slavegirls complained of the Sethani's having shown disgust. Heaven knows why, the whimsical king did not get angry! Beckoning the Sethani to approach, he

said: "Beauty is oozing from every pore of her body."

Remembering Lakhu's teaching, the Sethani sat down close to the king. Stroking her cheeks, the king ordered the two slavegirls to stand in front of him, as usual.

Then the king disregarded even the force of the sun god. If anyone felt slightly embarrassed it was the sun who hid his face behind a cloud. The Selhani had to keep the honour of her profession, as instructed by Lakhu, and the king, in the intoxication of his throne, had forgotten the difference between day and night.

Like the prime minister, the king too thoroughly enjoyed the cohabitation. Pleased, he gave the Sethani his necklace worth nine lakhs. Then he offered her the temptation of becoming his queen but she refused. She explained the norms of her trade. When she mentioned Lakhu, the king understood. Nor did the Sethani accept the invitation to stay in the palace for seven days. The trade forbade one to spend two nights in a row with one man. Better to die than to break one's rule. The king was so pleased with her beauty that he ordered the slavegirls to send the coach for her every alternate night.

As soon as she alighted from the coach the Sethani ran to Lakhu, fell into her arms and burst out crying. Patting her back, Lakhu said: "Don't cry, daughter. I understand your pain. It is the king's old habit to vomit and then fall unconscious. Of course, you will grow used to this too. Married women tolerate such vomiting every night, yet instead of a nine lakh necklace, they get only shoe blows on their head. Indeed their misfortunes are beyond reckoning."

Sobbing, the Sethani said: "What does it matter to me what others tolerate? How long can I survive on such false consolation?"

"Forget your consolation," said Lakhu sharply. "These forms of male

grossness are our source of wealth. Don't show disgust at such things. Accept them as your wealth."

So the Sethani spent seventeen years accepting new wealth every day, according to Lakhu's teaching. Fortunately the Sethani's youth and beauty did not decline with the years. Maturity and experience brought a new glow to her countenance. Her beauty was the talk of the town.

The goldsmith's son was not deaf. He, too, heard of her beauty. He was a well built, handsome youth. Telling his father that he was going out on an errand, he knocked at Lakhu's door. A girl came clattering down the stairs and opened the door.

He came into Lakhu's presence. Why waste time on an unknown man? When the girl mentioned the fee, he smiled and said: "Surely you don't need to worry about that. A man counts his cash before he crosses your threshold. But rubies fall each time I cough. Each ruby is worth one and a quarter lakhs. And what does it cost me to clear my throat?"

Lakhu started when she heard this. A few more enquiries and she soon came to know who he was.

The Selhani, dressed and jewelled, was looking at herself in the glass.

Today Lakhu's teaching was to be tested. Lakhu came into the room. Eyes fixed on the Sethani's beautiful face, she said. "Daughter, the honour of this house is in your hands today. Don't hesitate on account of the relation with a son. With every cough, priceless rubies will come to hand."

She sprang up like a startled she-cobra. She stared at Lakhu's wrinkled face. There was no time for much thought. "Shall I send him in then, daughter?" asked Lakhu eagerly.

As though murmuring in a dream, she said: "Yes, certainly, send him in. I have no faith in any relations now. When will such a priceless night come again?" □