Narrating Life : Krishna Sobti's *Zindaginama*

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Zindaginama is a narrative which though published in 1979, has a history going back as far as 1952 and coming right up to the present. It has had a constant grip on Sobti's imagination as well as on the reader who goes back to it time and again. It was in 1952 that the young Sobti submitted a manuscript of five hundred pages to Leader Press, Allahabad. Two years later, unable and unwilling to accept the editorial changes, she withdrew it after making due compensatory payment to the publisher.[1] It is this manuscript which several years later and several novels later surfaced as *Zindaginama Pahla Bhag* : *Zinda Rukh* obviously intended to be a two-part novel. The second part has now made an appearance in *Katha-Desh* October, 2010 as a short narrative written in the form of a letter and taking the story forward to the thirties of the twentieth century. It has stayed with the writer and haunted her imagination all these years. And in the intervening period it has overflowed its boundaries, in every possible way defying all normal expectations from a novel in its form of narration, embrace of history and its hold on the unconscious minds of a people as they are impacted by external reality. It is difficult to hold it within any single definition. The distance between the familiar and the unfamiliar is merged. Images conjunct and haunt us, metaphors rise out of its pages to evoke memories and to acquire new meanings.

Zindaginama announces by its very title, its intention to write a chronicle of life. How does one capture, narrate or organise character/nature of life itself? And if it is the protagonist, where do we locate the centrality of the narration? Other similar questions come up with references to identity, subjectivity and relationships. There is no way that there can be a beginning and an end: the narrative has to begin in the middle and end in midstream. Prefaced by two defining epigraphs it delineates a purpose and a line of action. The first of these is a short one which distinguishes between official history and people's history. The records of the rulers freeze history while in the people's minds it flows continuously, fluidly, and indifferent to the banks, it spreads its waters over unknown and unfathomed pasts. The image of the stream flowing is a defining one in the construct of this space-time continuum as the flow marks no clear divisions between the past, the present and the future. The margins can simply not be marked – there are many subterranean levels. The second epigraph is also a poem but a much longer one and it builds an atmosphere of an intense relationship to the land. There is an abundance of maternal metaphors which locate the land in geographical space and in its produce as it moves on to foreground its vibrant masculinity. Ensuing pages are a description of the festivals, the celebratory elements of folk culture leading to the final moment of dislocation when a parting has to take space. This move is different from all earlier dislocations, caused by the many invasions of the land for this is a shifting of the ground from beneath their feet. The rehabilitation process, marked by the subtitle *Zinda Rukh* is again a difficult reconciliation with the truncated reality and a new terrain. In this second epigraph, one realises retrospectively, lies the defining plan of the narrative. I use the term 'narrative' as the term 'novel' fails to do justice to it. Though the writer herself has used the word 'upanyas' on a couple of occasions. *Zindaginama* covers a time span of a little more than a decade in early twentieth century even as it moves further back into the past in its reference to bygone years and past histories. The two defining political moments are the Bengal partition of 1905 and the recruitment drive for the First World War in 1913-1914.[2] The partition of 1947 is nowhere on the horizon. But it is in the epigraph and indicates the origins of *Zindaginama* which lie in the historically inherited memory of an irrecoverable past. To that extent *Zindaginama* is both a celebration and an elegy, which

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has set itself the task of reconstructing the past while it can still be salvaged.

The second half of the title 'nama' literally meaning a chronicle, calls for an absent author or free-floating narrative, and perhaps a centre constantly in flux geared to the moment even as it moves into the second wave. Variously used by kings and gurus and storytellers, it lends itself easily to a collective voice and facilitates a broad canvas and a constant negotiation between the external and the internal, and if the narrative demands, between the individual and community as well as between subjectivity and objectivity. In the main a chronicle with epic dimensions, a nama belongs as much to narratives of belonging as of exodus. History has records of *Baburnama*, *Zafarnama*, *Akbarnama* and in our own times we have Allan Sealy's *The Trotter Nama* which traces the history of Anglo-Indians across centuries.[3]

The period between the withdrawal of the 1952 *Channa* and 1979 *Zindaginama* literally meaning *The Saga of Life*, did not lie fallow. Sobti wrote several novellas, novels and short stories during this period. Were they in anyway related to *Zindaginama* or fragments of it, or similar attempts to capture the past? Perhaps one can view two of these as explorations which are related. *Daar se Bichudi* (1958) is about war, dislocations and rehabilitations. The title literally means 'separated from the clan' but it has also been translated as *Memory's Daughter* (Katha 2008). The other is *Dilo-Danish* (1993), which is located in Delhi of the early decades of the twentieth century, uses Urdu of those times and is the story of Vakil Saheb and his two families, one legitimate with Kutumb ruling over the household and the other illegitimate, set in his mistress Mehak's cramped apartment. The connection with *Zindaginama* is perceptible at several levels – the use of the oral tradition and folk forms, the engagement with history and tradition and the rehabilitation necessitated by dislocation. Sobti's anthology of selected excerpts, *Sobti Ek Sobhbat* (1989) has some extracts under the title '*Zindaginama* – Kucch Aprakashit Ansh'. These extracts, at some point of time, found their way into *Dilo-Danish*, was it the writer's intention to consider the earlier narrative's migration to Delhi? Sobti is silent on this point but she is very vocal about her creative process both in *Shabdon Ke Alok Mein* (2005) and *Sobti-Vaid, Ek Samvaad* (Sobti-Vaid: A Dialogue), (2007)

Sobti-Vaid, Ek Samvaad reflects on the writer's intellectual preoccupations with time and history, and the ensuing process of living simultaneously in three different time frames: the present, the flow of past with its still points that surface back to life through recollection and the combined flow of these two into an unseen future. The originary perhaps is not identifiably locatable. The Derridean concept of difference is likely to offer help in understanding this three-fold flow of time. 'Differance' as Mark Currie, has observed, is a counter-strategy against 'the linearity of narrative and metaphysics of presence'.[4] If the sign signifies a structure of exclusion, then differance reflects its internal divisions. It questions the erasure of difference caused by definite meaning and location. Derrida's argument is based on his questioning of structuralism, my use of it is to extend it to a flow between the processes of contextualisation and decontextualisation and further to question both the closure implied by structure and the containment implied by calendar time as Sobti's epigraphs to *Zindaginama* do. Sobti's use of folk forms and the process of embedment of performative forms serves a similar purpose. Folk customs, festival celebrations, riddles, lullabies all represent a 'moment' in its continuity, not in its fixity. Agyeya, in his Samvatsar lectures 'Memory and Time' and 'Memory and Country' also uses the concept of space-time continuum, but Agyeya's meaning is somewhat different. The two lectures are connected both in their concepts and concerns. Agyeya foregrounds memory and defines it as the existential world of all reality, its perspectives and its expressions in language: 'The time we live in, the time which lives in us, both are parts of that natural perception; we feel this natural flow of both in each part of our body. We perceive the continuity of our existence (even though it is a continuity that changes every moment): 'We were, we are'... .(207).

In *Sobti-Vaid Samvaad*, both Krishna Sobti and Krishan Baldev Vaid dwell on their individual creative experiences and evolving patterns. Vaid in his treatment of time discusses *Guzra Hua Zamana* while Sobti chooses to focus on *Zindaginama* where she feels that it is more than a personal journey into the past, it is a collective one, a journey engaged in a constant negotiation between the decisions and the differences of the past and also concerned with capturing the memories of an unrecoverable past of a land left behind. *Zindaginama* was not written from personally lived memory but from a memory which was inherited and it attempts to capture the past, 'peeche chut gayi dharti ke mizaaz ko, rakh-rikhav, jeevan-shaili aur sanskritic tapman aur bhashia shabdsampda...'[6]

It is this linguistic wealth which evokes memories and is embedded in local usage and custom. As the narrative unfolds itself, a series of loosely clustered meetings, happening, moments used as atmospheric conducts come into play. Nearly all of them are folk forms and use oral tradition. Sobti uses the typical Punjabi word *pind* and not the Hindi word *gaon*. The cattle are returning from the fields, and the hearth fires are lit as the men come home. The aroma of the cooking fills the air as the birds too fly homewards. The centrality of the 'home', the

relationship with nature, the untoward linked to destiny complete this beginning and define the subject of this 'nama', which is the community caught up in the daily rituals but also enveloped by the mystic and the religious and conscious of the unknown future. Right at the beginning the act of storytelling is foregrounded when the children clamour for a story, '*Lalaji kahani*, *Lalaji bujhartein*, *Lalaji koi kissa*'. Storytelling is very different from a written narrative. It constantly summons the attention of the listener and demands a response, an *hunkara*, and this dialogic session may often be interrupted by wonder and questions. It offers space both for learning and for teaching and the interaction has its own psychological aspects in its communicative strategies and the community that it builds with the listeners. The act of telling embraces some aspects of performance. In a recent article, 'Knowledge, Fluid Cultures and Frozen Structures', Kapila Vatsayan prioritises the spoken word 'Vak' above the written the *logos*.[7] But Sobti despite deriving her inspiration from the spoken word, believes language in itself is not the only spark of a writer's creative impulse. The deeper meaning of words has to be recognized and they have to be viewed with 'detachment and passion — that acts like a critical force to weave the ideas into the text. . . .'(Some Thoughts on Writing, Partition and *Zindaginama*, 22).

Corresponding to the image of history as a flow in time, the oral narrative also has a tendency to break bank, flow into an expanse of land, collect silt and re-form itself to yield a fresh harvest at every stage. When events from the distant past are narrated, they are referred to as 'mashoor kissa ho guzra hai', a sentence difficult to translate for both the tense and the words can be handled in different ways and 'guzra' has several connotations. Time passes, people pass by and they also pass away and 'a well-known event had happened' or 'had taken place' or the simpler and more direct, 'Once upon a time this had happened'; 'long ago this took place'. One can keep on adjusting the active and the passive voice and try other combinations but both 'kissa' and 'guzra' carry heavy cultural meanings and evoke certain emotions. The word 'kissa' also implies a continuity, a retelling and a keeping alive. Kissas have a habit of turning into legends transmitted orally and variously until they surface in writing (which may also have several different versions). Punjab has its own share of legends and tales of romance and courage. Interestingly enough when oral narratives such as *Heer Ranjha* or *Sohni-Mahiwal* are transferred into written versions, they find a way back into oral transmission when people sing them.

In an article '*Srijan Ke Alok*' (*Katha-Desh* Oct. 2010), Sobti observes that creativity is a combination of a multitude of memories and association which persistently knock at the mind of the writer until the writer is ready to delve into this mysterious unknown.[8] For Sobti the creative act is not sudden or self-contained triggered off by an isolated event. It has to be born of some memory or association which keeps on drawing her in, into unknown depths and the creative act is likened to the process of extraction. This partly explains her lifelong fascination with *Zindaginama*, with history and collective memory and with the past. *Zindaginama* is an 'imagined' past not one which the author has experienced but it has been culled out of its presence in language, in rituals, in tales oft told and memories passed on by one generation to another. These rituals and practices become conjunction points in the narrative structure. At times the moral or religious concepts governing their origins may be absent, or they may have turned secular over a period of time, but when in actual practice they bring people together and are open to a re-questioning Lalli Shah's innocent queries are a good example of this kind of questioning as is the questioning in the majlis. Social rituals which are participatory and draw people into an intimacy provide an open space. But religious rituals are more private and draw their own boundaries. *Zindaginama* concerns itself with social rituals which allow interaction, often act as a therapy, mark shifts in life, express emotions and help the participants to overcome their inhibitions. Performances like masquerades and swangs, of which there are several in *Zindaginama*, enable historical reviewing and social critiquing.

Lullabies, kaafis (verses) from Bulle Shah, Abdul Lateef and Waris Shah, Lohri songs all bring people together. The ceremony of a child's being initiated into school-going is directed at teaching humility and respect. It is against this setting that the narrative spreads itself to encompass the past with all its conflicts and complexities as well as the living vibrations of rural life in Punjab. Its multi-layered strands refuse to be contained within the actual time of the story. Movements in and out are many and reach out to other centres, historical events, political records, Anglo-Sikh wars, the reforms or indifference of Mughal Emperors, migrations to other lands and family feuds. There are many centres. First the village community, within it the Shah family, within it the Shahji-Rabiyan relationship, restrained and unexpressed. Other centres are the village *majlis*, where men get together and the young girls' *trinjan* when, on the threshold of adulthood, they get together for a night-long vigil, singing and spinning, teasing each other, trying to gain the confidence of others and articulating their own shy, half-awakened desires. This is a ritualistic goodbye to their girlhood and they have already begun to think nostalgically about it. It is through such centres that the emotional and historical journeys are marked.

One needs to ask whether the world of *Zindaginama* is real or idyllic especially when the language used is very poetic. For instance the word *succha* meaning pure, unused or untouched is used alike for courtyard – '*aangan succha hai*' (18), for darkness – '*succha andhera*' (23) and also for beauty – '*succha roop*' (35). *Sajra* or *sajri* meaning fresh is used for tears – *sajri rulai* (44) for new motherhood – *sajrian maian*'(37) as well as for the sight of a friend which is compared to an early dawn – *sajri dhoop* (43). Each line holds the reader's attention, wishing her to proceed slowly and to establish a friendship in easy stages. In after years Sobti put down some notes on *Zindaginama*. In 'Chand Notes *Zindaginama* Par' (A Few Notes on *Zindaginama*) while explaining the origins of the writing, she moves further back to capture the fullness of loss, briefly and dramatically: '*Ek Waqt. Ek peedi. Ek khatra*. *Ek tootan*. *Ek teedkan. Ek trasdy'.* (*Sobti Ek Sohbat*, 1989). (A time. A generation. A danger. A crumbling. A fracturing. A tragedy). Not a personal tragedy but one which took the whole area and its people in its embrace. Sobti then proceeds to describe the partition riots, the corpse-laden trains filled with their silence, the exodus with the refugees straggling in long caravans with smell of the land left behind still lingering in their nostrils and mixing with the tears in their eyes. Then another arrival, another rehabilitation and a new tree takes root, justifying the subtitle of this first volume – *Zinda Rukh*.[9]

Returning to the earlier question – whether it is real or not – one finds an answer in its living, humming and bustling community with all its economic and emotional pressures, domestic strife, invasions, and migrations, political histories and colonial impositions. These references go as far back to Mohammed Gauri's invasion and mark the present with a reference to the bomb thrown at the Viceroy in Chandni Chowk. Lord Curzon invites criticism for his luxurious lifestyle and the stirrings of rebellion against the British are felt. The government is referred to as '*randi* sarkar', wayward and rudderless.[10]

In these inroads into other histories and other pasts, a space-time expansion takes place and various dialects and languages live side by side moving comfortably between Persian and Urdu and Punjabi and between the literary and the colloquial. The role the mirasis play in this expansion of the narrative is extremely significant. It is they who through their performances and songs, transmit history across generations. Their 'swangs' (satirical pretend games) and masquerades along with their question-answer sessions recall the past to public memory. Through their performances and pretend-games, they take on the role of objective narrators. Similarly in the majlis as the past is recounted and connected with the present, the reliability and veracity of past events is questioned as there are no eye-witness accounts (358). Shahji feels that it is a legitimate question and his response to it is in tune with the first epigraph of *Zindaginama*. History works at more than one level. There are the official records and then there is the people's memory kept alive by retellings in the oral tradition and the varying accounts of the mirasis. In 'Chand Notes *Zindaginama* Par', Sobti elaborates on this by taking the same happening and giving first the account of the vanquished (again an unusual step, for normally histories present the victor's version) , then the oral tradition followed by the official record. To this she adds a fourth in the form of a document, a letter written by Maharani Zinda to Henry Lawrence, the British Resident. This is followed by a majlis, a meeting of the village community where the subject again surfaces. The oral tradition is also represented in two different forms, one a *swang*, and then through a loosely constructed song by children. It is this multiplicity of perspectives and narration which *Zindaginama* uses to its advantage.

The Shah family with its land and power remains at the centre of the narrative. Shahji's younger brother Kashi Shah is religiously inclined and is a man of peace. Shahji's wife is childless and proceeds to pilgrim centres praying for the gift of a child. Lalli is born and Rabiyan comes to the house both as a sibling and a nurse maidto look after Lalli. Rabiyan is young, pretty and innocent. And she falls in love with Shahji who is restrained and conscious of the age gap. But Shahni is disturbed. Kashi Shah advises his sister-in-law to seek peace within her own mind through meditation, a cure which men have always recommended to women. But the love grows and Rabiyan sings of her desires guised in Bulle Shah's kaafi.

> Nan mein behayi, nan kanwari
> per beta god khilaunyungi
> Ek duna achraj gaoongi
> Mein pyara yaar manaungi
>
> (Neither married, nor unmarried
> I shall nurse a child in my lap
> And achieve another miracle
> *Beseech my dear beloved)*.[4] (my translation)

But the very shadowness of this love, hovering in the wings, in itself becomes a reason for letting it be. Nobody dare question it.

It is in this context as through the lives of the other women in the village, that the patriarchal character of this society surfaces time and again. While the hierarchy in social power is defined by caste, power and property, man-woman relationships work through familiar models of masculinity and femininity. The women covering their head is only one of the symbols of subordination. But a

woman's life is subjected to other forms of control – respectability, surveillance, lack of privacy and lack of choice. In fact adulthood is denied to women except if they happen to be of the lower caste and perform other people's domestic chores. Sons come home from the wars to murder their mother's lover while male promiscuity goes unpunished and bigamous relationships end up embittering women's lives. The life of a woman is meant to follow the laid down pattern – marriage, motherhood and the rest whether it brings happiness and security or not is nobody's concern. It is Sobti's portrayal of these relationships and her realistically capturing characters like Chachi Mehri, Lal Bibi, Shano, Baghuti, Pyari, Bebe, Dhanidei, the two Shahnis and Rabiyan that roots this world in its rural environment.

In how many ways can one approach this novel? It spills over in different directions, each one of them asking for independent attention. But the Shah household does not yield its centre. The long-awaited Part-II has not yet appeared, but in October 2010, as mentioned earlier, a fragment has appeared in *Katha-Desh* under the title *Zindaginama-Do*. Set in Samvat 1988, it recalls the period of the early 1930s (of the Gregorian calendar). This fragment is in the form of a letter, as dense in its implications as Vakil Sahib's will in *Dilo-Danish*. Written by Shahni (Shahji's wife and Lalli's mother), it begins after a gap of some years. Apparently both the Shah brothers are no more, Lalli is also dead as his wife, Lochan. We are not told how this all has happened but Shahani is left with the task of bringing up her granddaughter Channa and hostile relatives are clamouring for control over this household which lacks a male head. The letter is addressed to Channa's maternal grandparents and requests their help in the form of some legal advice. Channa's right to inheritance is at stake and her life is also in danger. The crack in the joint family is an uncanny harbinger of the Partition. The letter disturbs one, it leaves long-silence for us to listen to, if we can. One is possessed by a strange foreboding. Unable to bear it, I approached the writer for help. Lalli, it seems, as he was returning from the city after having won a case and engrossed in thoughts of his childhood and Rabiyan, is murdered by his enemies. Lochan had died in childbirth. Is Channa going to get her inheritance? Or is it going to be a dislocation? *Zindaginama-Do* is intended to be an urban narrative – another generation, another setting but the life (zindagi) flows on. A different culture comes into being, layering the earlier one.[11]

While in the village Shahni tries hard to continue the earlier traditions of a wholesome, open education. The maulvi teaches Channa Urdu, and the priest from the Gurudwara inducts her into learning Gurumukhi. Music is being taught and a harmonium has been sent for. Shahni's attempt at saving the past, apparently is under threat. The confluence of cultures, likewise, is moving towards divisions. The thirties was a period of that kind. Shahni's sense of powerlessness, her distrust of her relatives, the feeling of insecurity, of isolation and dependency are all very familiar (I recall the experiences of my own maternal grandmother who was widowed early and left with asix-month old girl child) and are passed on to the reader. Where have all the swangs and gossip sessions gone? Where the free exchange of the majlis and the women's friendship?

The beginnings of this extract or fragment hark back to the ending of *Zindaginama* : *Pahla Bhag*, which ends with Shah Jahan handing over his power to Chhaju Bhagat in exchange for medical help. It reflects the manner in which power can change hands. But of greater significance is Mian Mir's visit to Chhaju Bhagat. Mian Mir stands outside Chhaju's kitchen and asks for permission to enter. Chhaju refuses this permission and chides him for not stepping in unhesitatingly.[12] Why should Mian Mir stand outside? Do we relate to each other in fear and suspicion or do we redefine relationships in a more open and way?

Zindaginama's challenge to conventional constructs and its journey into the past together create a world which is contained and defined and yet not so in its vast spread. When we come face to face with a classic, there may not be an initial recognition but when it continues to live with us and its manifold aspects touch our daily life, the resonance surrounds us and recognition dawns on us. We go back again and again and come back with renewed treasures. It happens to us when the text summons us and we are left with wonder, shock or unasked questions. It happens to many of us with writers like Kafka, Dostoevsky, Manto and Intizar Hussain. Even simplicity and directness leave a great deal to be unearthed. Images linger in our mind, phrases haunt us as they capture a moment of human experience, one which responds to an existential need. After all, neither a text nor life is self-contained. *Zindaginama* encompasses the before and after just as it enlarges the specific to the universal. *Zindaginama* is the inheritance which Channa has lost – the Channa who was first born in the 1952 early version. This marks the flow of history and the continuity of life with all its resilience and inheritance.

Notes

1. Refer Sobti 'Some Thoughts on Writing, Partition and *Zindaginama*' included in *Reading Partition/Living Partition*. Ed. Jasbir Jain (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2006, pp.22-29), 21-23 wherein she says that the narrative was begun soon after partition and completed in 1952 and given to a publisher in Allahabad. But an entry in the *Encyclopedia of Indian Literature*

Vol. 5. Ed. Mohanlal. (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1992, p. 4126) mentions the date as 1944. The writer's own version has greater authenticity and is supported by the concerns expressed in the second epigraph of *Zindaginama.*

2. For more details refer Tripti Jain, 'The World of *Zindaginama*: A Woman's Perspective'? *Indian Feminisms.* Eds. Jasbir Jain and Avadhesh K. Singh. (New Delhi: Creative Books, 2001), pp. 207-212.
3. I. Allan Sealy's novel *The Trotter Nama* chronicles the Anglo-Indian history. In the 'Prologue', Sealy refers to the earlier chronicles and defines the form as an epic chronicle, a container of various hues and colours (6-7). He stresses the difference between chronicle and history. Shyamala Narayan in 'The Nation and the Anglo-Indian: A Study of the *Trotter Nama*' observes that a 'nama' contains digressions and descriptions (390). Sobti, working on slightly different times, employs different parameters and seeks to redefine history as multiple and varied and a single version of the past as one-sided and factual.
4. Refer Mark Currie, *Difference*: *the New Critical Idiom*. (London: Routledge, 2004) and see chapter 3 on Difference, (45-65), pp. 56-60. Currie's comments on Derrida, his concept of metaphysical history, and the distinction he makes between the 'sign' and the signified between the written word and the spoken are very insightful. (60)
5. S.H. Vatsayan 'Agyeya', 'Memory and Time' and 'Memory and Country'. First Samvatsar Lectures delivered at Sahitya Akademi. English translations of the two essays by Tripti Jain are included in *The Writer as Critic.* Ed. Jasbir Jain. (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2011), pp. 191-220.
6. A free translation would be 'the mood of the land left behind, it ways of living, presentation and cultural environment with all its linguistic wealth'.... (*Sobti-Vaid, Ek Samvaad* 30).
7. Kapila Vatsayan writes, 'I do not have to remind the audience of the highest place given to *vak* (speech) comparable to the concept of *logos* and it was only for civilization classification that the written word began to be prioritized.' (In 'Knowledge, Fluid, Cultures and Frozen Structures; *Summerhill* Vol. xvi. No. 1, Summer 2010 (1-30) 10.
8. 'Srijan ke Alok', *Katha-Desh* Vol. 14. No. 8. October 2010 (7-11), 9.
9. 'Chand Notes *Zindaginama* Par', *Sobti Ek Sohbat* (New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 1989) 373-385. 373.
10. '*Randi sarkar firangi hume kya* / *Bejurm ko suli chada degi*? (Will this rudderless foreign government hang the innocent?) The word *randi* has many meanings. It is a word of abuse, can be used alike for widow or prostitute. Generally implies a woman without a man, here a government which is directionless and without guidance.
11. This was in a long conversation over the telephone on 17 April, 2011. This is referred to with the permission of the writer.
12. The English translation of this extract from *Zindaginama* is available in *Reading Partition/Living Partition*. Ed. Jasbir Jain, 18- 21. The passage has been translated by Tripti Jain.

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