

# Dead Daughter

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Illustration by  
Laurie Lafrance

Even now, after all these years, whenever I come across the word funeral, I think about that hot summer day and the last rites which took place in our house. The funeral of Neelam Prashad links my present to my past.

I never remember experiencing another funeral like it in our town. The chaos was the same as any other funeral — neighbours and friends gathered in our house, orgies of anguish, wailing, and beating of breasts. And, as always, the women were more expressive than the men. They sat on the hot and hard ground, clasped each other's shoulders, beat their own breasts, and cried in inarticulate utterances. The men, on the other hand, sat quietly. What made the funeral exceptional was that the body was not in our house. Perhaps not having the body made the mourning more difficult.

It had been an ordinary summer day; by noon the sun was blazing hot. The mailman delivered an air mail letter to us, not an unusual event in itself since we were accustomed to receiving air mail letters from Canada.

I opened the letter and read it aloud to my mother. It was written in Punjabi and was just a few lines long. I had difficulty

deciphering the poor handwriting, but the letter began, "The purpose of this letter is to inform you that our daughter Neelam died..." Mother protested and demanded that I read the letter again, carefully.

When she heard the same words, she shrieked. The woman from next door, having heard the wails, came running to our house and they cried in anguish together. Then a woman from two doors down came, and so it went. Shamu, the bare-footed boy from next door ran to the bank to fetch my father. In no time, our house was filled with mourners.

Neelam was not a relative of ours; she was the daughter of our former neighbour and my father's best friend, Suraj Prashad. During the partition, my father and Suraj Prashad traveled out of Pakistan and into India together. In the midst of the terrifying atrocities, they supported each other and swore a bond of friendship, a bond which remained intact even though Prashad had moved to Canada.

After my mother drained all her tears, she came to my father and said, "We should do everything properly." My mother was a devotee and knew all the rituals of birth and death and how to please the gods.

"I shall go and get the holy one," my father said.

"No, not yet," she responded. "We should get ready for the funeral."

"Funeral? Why a funeral?" I could not hold back my question.

My mother ignored me. "She was just a young girl. A maiden. Lord Shiva must be very angry with her. We have a few relics in our house which belonged to her."

Mother wanted to be on the safe side. She gathered up all of Neelam's cloth articles the Prashads had left with us when they moved to Canada. Fearing that Lord Shiva, the god of death, might strike at our house, my mother instructed my father to take her belongings to the cremation grounds.

The next day a holy man came dressed in saffron robes. While chanting a prayer, he placed large pats of edible butter and pieces of dried fruit on a fire. When he was through performing all the rituals, my mother fed him curried foods and paid him a hefty sum for his services.

One last ritual had to be performed. My father went on a pilgrimage to Benares, the holiest of the cities of the Hindus and the earthly abode of the god Shiva. He threw the ashes from Neelam's possessions into the holy river Ganges and took a bath to purify himself. He also brought back a set of enamelware with Neelam's name carved on each pot and pan. It was sent as a gift to the Prashads. Because of the great care that had been taken, my mother was convinced that the girl had been liberated from the cycle of birth, death, and reincarnation and had achieved unity with the eternal.

"We could have bought an electric fan for what you spent on the ritual," I said to my mother. "That would have kept us cool all summer."

"Your free thinking will never gain you salvation." She was flushed with anger. "When you start earning your own money, you can buy all the fans you want. I really don't know what deep-seated feelings you have against the girl. You don't even remember her."

My mother was with feelings towards the girl had not been told the truly sorry that she had. And I did remember the tiny mite of a girl who had been in the fourth floor she left for Canada.

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My mother was wrong. I had no ill-feelings towards the girl. Even though we had not been told the cause of death, I felt truly sorry that she had died prematurely. And I did remember Neelam; she was a tiny mite of a girl with rosy cheeks. We had been in the fourth class together before she left for Canada.

"College education is doing this to him," mother said to my father. "You should have found him a job instead of wasting money and his time on all this college education."

As always, my father remained silent. It was futile to argue with mother about rituals, vigils, fasts, or the worship of the sun and the moon. To her, the moon was divine. Every month she fasted for 24 hours to honour the new moon. As soon as the moon appeared again, she would gaze at the narrow sliver with eagerness and call everyone else to look at it too.

"The moon is not a god; it is actually a piece of rock," I said to her once. "An American, Neil Armstrong, went there and even brought back some rocks."

"You went with him, I suppose, and that is why you know it is just a piece of rock?"

"No, but I've seen the pictures."

"Did you take the pictures?"

Mother was adamant; no one could convince her that humans had landed on the moon. My father was also orthodox, but he did not argue. As a guard in the bank and a small farmer, he worked tirelessly and lived frugally to earn the money which my mother spent freely on religious customs and pilgrimages.

Neelam's death had other consequences. My father lost an opportunity to benefit from his friendship with Suraj Prashad, who had appointed him to serve as a matchmaker for his daughter. Before the letter arrived, he had positioned himself well. Mr. Gautam, the bank manager and my father's boss, had offered him a promotion and the forgiveness for a loan if his son, Parshotam, would be betrothed to Neelam. Parshotam attended the College in Hoshiarpur and was working on a master's degree in economics. It might have been a good match. To my parent's satisfaction, even the town astrologer approved of the planned marriage because Parshotam's stars agreed with Neelam's stars.

There was a complication. My mother heard a rumour that Mrs. Gautam had saved a young Moslem's life during partition. She hid him in her house while rampaging mobs looked for him. The rumour spread that Mrs. Gautam did not save the Moslem's life because she was good-hearted but because the Moslem was her lover and the father of Parshotam.

Not only the bank manager, but many other people were willing to offer my father advantages if their sons could go to Canada. But I dared not inquire too much concerning this marriage arrangement.

"These people are insane — selling their sons," I said to my father. "They don't even know anything about the girl."

"What do they want to know about the girl?" my mother asked before my father could say anything.

"What she looks like and how she thinks," I said.

"What she looks like and how she thinks? Our girls always look beautiful and think right," my mother answered.

Then she blasted my college. When I had first enrolled in college, my mother had bragged about me and the school, but her mind had been changed. A marriage between two staff members at the college had caused a scandal throughout the province. Ranja Singh, a debonair professor and poet, married a colleague, Miss Kapoor, from a well-known family. Not only was she a beauty, but she was high caste. Ranja Singh regrettably was a harijan, a low caste, and so the marriage was taboo. The Kapoor family had lots of influence on the college managing committee because of their wealth and position. Soon after returning from the honeymoon, the professor was dismissed from the college without reason. Many threats, but few sympathetic gestures, were shown towards the couple.

A handful of students — all of them low caste except for me — commiserated with the newlyweds. We demonstrated in front of the President's and the Principal's offices and demanded that Mr. Singh should be reinstated. Neither official would meet with us. I knew that the demonstrations would not have any influence and that we were asking for trouble. A few of my classmates made crude remarks about me siding with low class people. My roommate whom I liked — he always fed stray dogs and cows with his left-over food — simply moved out and left me to pay the whole rent by myself.

That was bad, but for me the worst was yet to come. I had to face my mother who waited for me at home in a tigerish mood.

"How dare that *chammar* boy defile one of our girls!" She confronted me as soon as I put my bag down.

"He did nothing. They fell in love with each other and got married."

"Love?" she said, "Rama, Rama, Rama..."

"What's wrong with love?" I asked. The conversation was oppressive to me.

"That *chammar* boy must have used some sort of sorcery on that poor girl which made her head run around. Otherwise why would one of our girls go after that scarecrow?"

I was patient. "You should not call him all those names. He is one of the best-looking and most intelligent men I have ever known."

"So that is why you went on a strike instead of attending classes? You should have gone on a hunger strike and fasted unto death."

I was never forgiven at home or at college for that demonstration. My mother believed that sending me to college was a mistake which filled my head with bad and immoral notions. I always felt that the demonstration made me a better person than I otherwise would have been.

Soon after my graduation, I escaped from that ritualized and limited world and came to live in the United States. The attitudes toward religion, sectarianism, and

personal freedom were different here than in the world in which I grew up. For the first time in my life I began to realize what it meant to live in a secular and pluralistic world which I had always envisioned. American civilization was a true melting pot, unlike the world I came from in which one's religious and communal visions dictated everything.

The time went by fast in Washington where I studied and worked. The demonstrations I saw in Washington reminded me of my demonstrating back home. I had mixed feelings.

Letters came from home. My mother always worried about my salvation and morals. She also implored me in each and every letter to go to Canada to pay our personal condolences to the Prashads for the death of their daughter Neelam. The Prashads lived on Canada's west coast. My mother seemed not to be able to comprehend the distance or the effort it would take to go and see them. In the end, I yielded to my mother's wishes and decided to take a train trip across Canada at the end of which I would make a brief visit to the Prashads.

I flew to Toronto where I would be able to catch a train to the west coast. After I checked into a hotel, I went out for a walk. On the busy streets, a raw nervousness came over me. It followed me no matter where I went: to a shopping mall, a bookstore, a restaurant. The city itself was like other large American cities; it held no surprises. Yet, I could not shake my feelings of being out of place.

Randomly I stepped into a bank to cash some traveller's cheques. There were long lines at all the tellers' windows. As I waited, the cashier caught my attention. She had light brown skin and an exotic and inviting face, like the ones which always intrigued me on the billboards that advertised holidays in Mayatlan. I dredged my memory and realized I had seen the girl before. As I advanced up the line and studied her more intently, I felt anxious and embarrassed.

"May I help you?" A voice addressed me while I was still in a daze, struggling with my memory. I realized that I was now to the front of the line.

I smiled uncertainly. She smiled back, a sunny smile.

I tried to force some sort of conversation with her while I signed my name slowly on the traveller's cheques. Even though I can normally be charming and at ease with strangers, I couldn't initiate a conversation. The raw nervousness turned into a tension which I felt growing between us.

"Are you visiting here?" The disarming innocence of her question broke the tension and gave me an opening to talk. When I looked up at her, she had a friendly and open look on her face.

"Yes, I am visiting from Washington." Our eyes focused on each other. "You live here?" I felt foolish as soon as the words came out.

"Yes," she said. "But not in the city, out in the suburb of Mississauga."

"Are you from India?" I did not feel uncomfortable asking her the question

though many Indians living abroad take the question as an offence.

"I was born there."

"Where?"

"In the Punjab."

"What district?"

"Hoshiarpur."

"That is where I am from," I volunteered jubilantly. "What town?"

"Moran Wali."

I was stunned; I had heard the name of my own town. And then the life-giving recognition hit me. "Neelam, Neelam Prashad. You're Neelam Prashad!"

"Now I am Neelam Khan," she corrected me. Her tone was calm but assertive. She stressed the "Khan."

Later over coffee, our conversation was like a dream — charming and vivid one moment, sad at the next.

"My parents must have written about me."

"Yes, they wrote that you were not with them any more." She did not understand what I meant.

"They broke all relations with me when I decided to marry a Moslem. We have not seen each other since." She told me about how happy she was. She adored her husband, a civil engineer, and her son who had just started kindergarten. The family lived in a stylish house in the suburbs, and she enjoyed her part-time job at the bank. Except for the parental rejection, her life was in order.

Later on in my hotel room, I dressed for an evening of reminiscence at Neelam's house. I thought about myself and Neelam; we were the children of partition and grew up hearing horror stories from our parents. From those stories I could understand our parents. Having known bloodshed and slaughter, they would find it difficult and unconventional to accept a mixed marriage. But so many years had passed that their hate seemed pathetic.

Neelam's husband Khalid was handsome, affable, and understanding. He welcomed me with enthusiasm and said, "You brought a touch of joy into my wife's life. It is nice to know that someone from back home accepts her as she is." We discussed politics, the economy, ethnic problems, and his job. Intentionally, soon after dinner, he left us alone.

We were both in a pensive mood and stared at each other.

"Have you been in touch with your parents?" I asked.

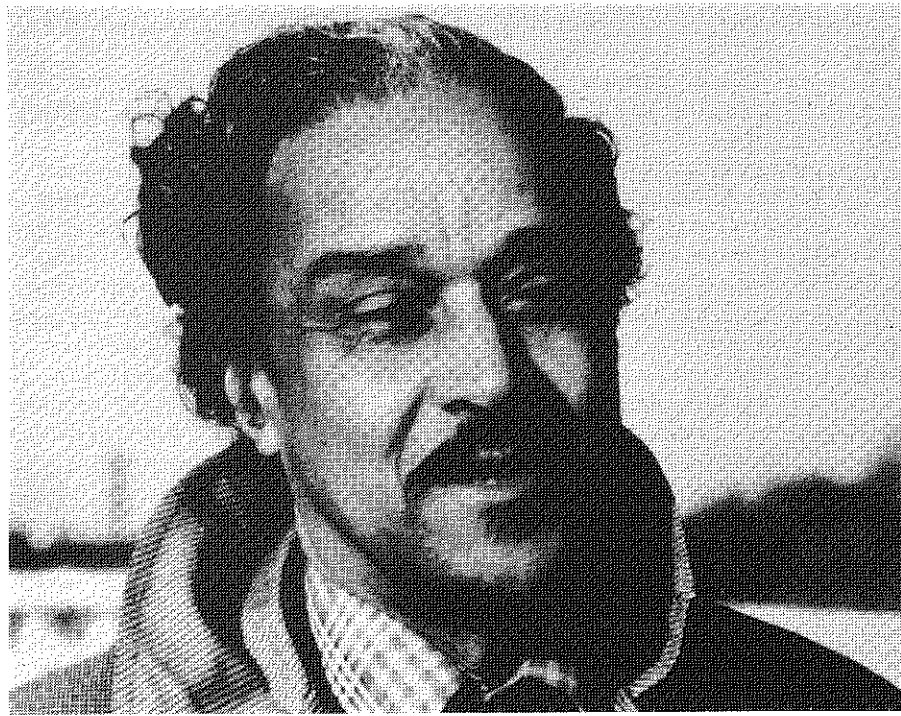
"No," she said quietly. "My parents believe that children who do not follow their parents' mores are dead."

"Did you know that before you decided to marry Khalid?"

"Of course," she said. "Saying yes to an arranged marriage would have been to sacrifice my whole life to something I could not control. Saying no to the marriage devastated my much-loved parents. It was a dilemma. What could I do?" Tears began to roll over her cheeks.

I had no consolation to offer her. My own mind filled with silence.

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### Marc Glassman

*Wilson Harris was born in Guyana when it was still a British colony, in 1920. He took advantage of his position as senior land surveyor for the government to become intimately acquainted with the people of the interior in then British Guiana. Harris steeped himself in the myths and legends of the "natives" while maintaining a cultural veneer befitting a colonial official. He moved to England in 1959 and published his first novel, Palace of the Peacock, to great critical acclaim the following year.*

*Harris' first four novels form a group which explores the mythology of his homeland. The Guyanan Quartet consists of remarkable works which create a cross-cultural pollination, dealing as they do with a combination of European archetypal adventures grafted onto a mysterious evocation of the Guyanese landscape and population. Guyanese natives are Caribbean Indian, African, South American and Asian in origin, so the possibilities for cross-fertilization are endless, as Harris has clearly discovered.*

*His novels, poetry and essays reveal a sophisticated sensibility with an awareness of Third World economics, Jungian psychology, African mythology and linguistic theory. He was interviewed by Marc Glassman after his appearance at the Fall 1988 Wang International Festival of Authors in Toronto.*

Marc Glassman: I'm interested in you as a writer but also as a person who has come from one culture and is now living in another. Would you tell me something about that transition?

Wilson Harris: I left Guyana in 1959; I was 38 and I had traveled extensively in the interior of Guyana, which means that I sensed the different kinds of landscapes, because the terrain changes quite complexly and sometimes dramatically as one moves from the coastlands into the interior. Now in regard to the question of moving from one culture to another, I think that if I had left earlier, I would not have been able to visualize it the way I did, and if I'd left later, then I might have been a bit quiescent about those sorts of issues.

I appear to be speaking intellectually about an issue which is really a deep-seated intuitive one. (I must establish this caveat, that when one attempts to intellectualize what exists in one's fiction, in a complex and perhaps truly authentic way, [one places] a different emphasis on the discourse.) What seems to me peculiar about Guyana and indeed about South America and the Caribbean is that for many generations, there were very powerful European models that had been imposed on the native cultures. Now these models, let us call them archetypal myths (and I use the word myth in a profound sense to imply ways in which the colonizing power sought to articulate its moral position), those very formidable structures

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were implicitly inter-archetypes or myths eclipsed by the Euro- problem was, how to bond and to arrive at the European model of a different kind of relational archetype, to create Prior to that historical self-realization dialogue at all, there was a tension, but deep inside existed the seed of potential. This meant that one situation in such a world was a double European myth. Its total solace to its partiality, to its we moved into a different relation to the nation, a different kind of which altered the pre- nation, transfiguring much more profoundly a new kind of key to the colonial complex through visualization and resonance. These have been deeply buried archetypes.

Let me give you an example of this. In *The Secret Life of Perseus* Perseus has a potent role. The surveyor who traverses the River, is in part a Perseus, a burden of the Perseus. There are two figures of Perseus: Fenwick, the one of the members of the club. They pick up a native myth and re-interpret it; they have b