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IN

SEARCH

OF



HEER

MANJUL BAJAJ

In Search of Heer

by Manjul Bajaj



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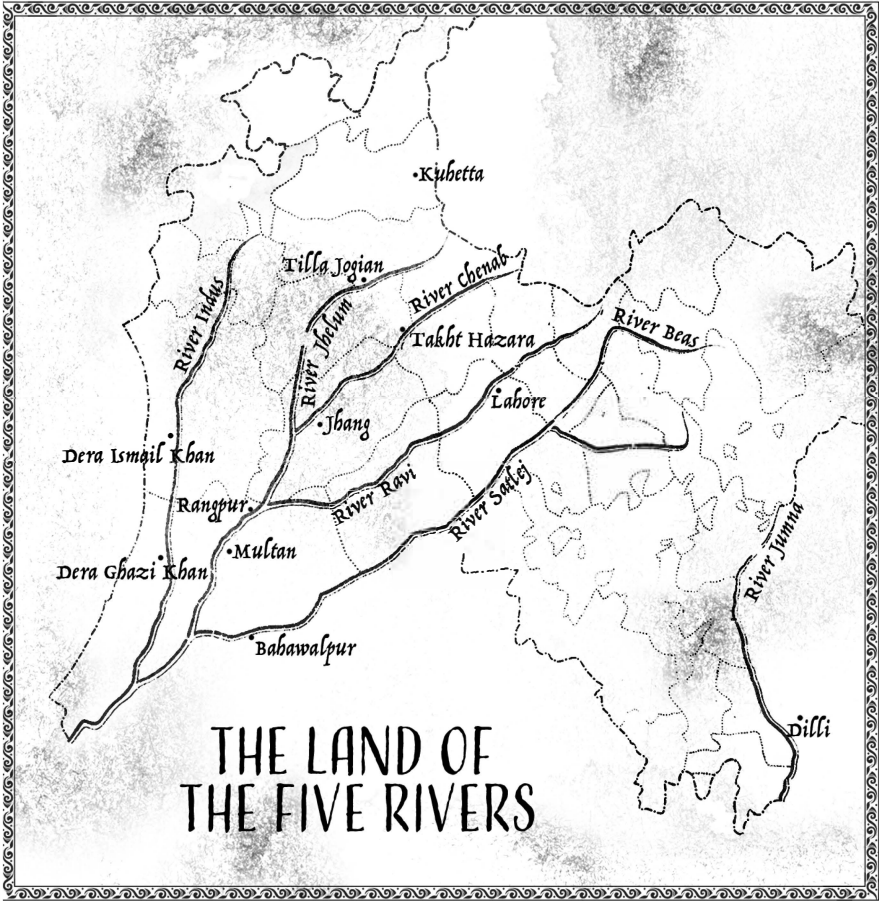
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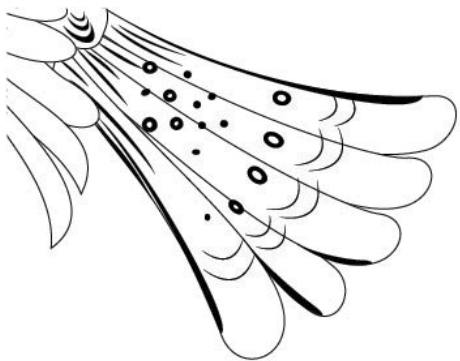
IN SEARCH OF HEER

Manjul Bajaj worked in the field of environment and rural development before she became a writer. She is the author of *Come, Before Evening Falls* (shortlisted for the Hindu Literary Prize in 2010) and *Another Man's Wife* (shortlisted for the Hindu Literary Prize in 2013). She has also written two books for children —*Elbie's Quest* and *Nargisa's Adventures*.

‘The future has an ancient heart.’

– Carlo Levi





I

LEAVING HOME



Deedho No More

EVEN WITH A BLINDFOLD on me, I would know Takht Hazara in an instant. I would know it from the sound of the Chenab as it rushes and rolls over the boulders congregated like a gathering of ruminating old men on the bend in the river. From the fluttering of the terns winging their way to their nests in the sandbanks at dusk. And from the smell of the winter fog on the riverbank as it gets smoky with the smell of burning cowdung patties. But most of all from the soft caress of the river breeze on my face, its touch as gentle as my father's hands as they wiped away my tears when I was a boy.

But Takht Hazara was not for me.

You could say that it was ordained from birth that I should leave my father's village one day. What parents would name their son Deedho and expect him to stay the course? Dee-dho, dee-dho, dee-dho. Like a donkey braying down a dirt path protesting the too-heavy load on its feckless back. One could make excuses for them, I suppose. You could blame it on my mother's exhaustion. The nine successful deliveries that preceded my birth—seven sons and two daughters—must have left her with very little imagination and originality when it came to baby names. Or, perhaps, it could be attributed to the overprotective and intense love that my father felt for his youngest son and how it coalesced into this weak, squeaky

sound for a name. Like something that's knobbly at the knees, green behind the ears, entirely without spine. What stature could anyone hope to grow into with a name like that? Youthful rebellion was a given from the first time that misguided moniker left my fond parents' lips. You could say that my departure from Takht Hazara began with the giving of that ridiculous name at my birth.

In contrast, my family name was a proud one, one becoming of the best of men. But I needed to cross the river and enter the world as a stranger before I could stake my claim to it. In my village there were hundreds of Ranjhas. My seven brothers, my scores of cousins, their combined progeny. All ruddy-skinned, bright-eyed, long-limbed, narrow-hipped, broad-shouldered, full of male shine and swagger, or getting there. I could never have become Ranjha, living peaceably amidst all those Ranjhas. I had to leave Takht Hazara to repossess and claim the name of my clan and make it truly my own—to relegate into oblivion the brothers, the cousins, the nephews, all—and stand poised across the vast, undulating deserts of time, the sole bearer of that name.

After I left Takht Hazara, I heard some stories circulating of my being a rake of sorts. Not true. I was nothing more than an average scorer at the rough and tumble in the haystacks game. What ladykiller could go around making amorous conquests being called Deedho all the while? I was just a lad. Easy bantering, getting a laugh out of the ladies, playing Krishna with my flute to the gaggle of cowgirls on the riverbank—it came naturally to me. Charm ran freely in our bloodline. But in Takht Hazara I was and always would be a tail-ender. Pampered, indulged, favoured by my father, but the runt of the litter all the same. The youngest born don't get to grow into their illustrious fathers' shoes. It's not scripted that way. Unless you're not squeamish about fratricide.

My father, Chaudhary Mauzzudin or Mauju Chaudhary as he was more commonly known, was a benign banyan tree of a man. While he lived, rebellion was not an option. Everything prospered under

his shade. Like the fretting of the black ants, the stinging nastiness of the bees, the scurrying diligence of the squirrels, the raucous shrieking of the parrots, the reckless swinging of the long-tailed monkeys and the night-time grumbling of the grey owls know a hospitable home and an easy co-existence in the spreading branches and aerial roots of the grand ficus, all of us brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, cousins, elders and youngsters knew not our own warring natures and varying proclivities while we were contained in the expansive, all accepting goodness of my father's heart.

When I was barely a young lad of eight or nine summers, some premonition of my future careers as a legendary lover and wandering fakir must have rippled through me.

'I don't want a haircut,' I said, running away from the monthly tonsuring ritual.

Father, my seven older brothers and I were sitting in a neat row on the raised platform running along the front of the house, being ministered to with scissors and scalpels by the village barber and his two grown-up sons. I simply stood up and started walking away. My curly brown locks were too beautiful to be messed with by these thick-wristed, heavy-handed, coarse-fingered men. The barber's sons scurried after me trying to persuade me back to my place. Father stalled them with a gently held up palm.

'Let the child do as he pleases,' he said. 'There are worse crimes in this world than keeping long hair.'

My eldest brother's wife hunted through her vanity box and mockingly made a present of her arsi to me. It amused me to wear that mirrored ring she gave me for many days. When she passed by, I made it a point to gaze at my reflection in the ring and sigh in mock admiration. To crack jokes at one's own expense is not entirely without danger. The incident left me saddled with the reputation of being a dandy.

Father, having conferred the right of self-determination to me on matters tonsorial, did not once get swayed into decreeing otherwise.

I wore it long, I teased it into a mass of curls, I oiled it and perfumed it with the finest fragrances. I had it cut to a manageable length whenever I tired of its excessive drama and grew it back again a few months later. When the mood took me, I stuck a peacock feather in my tresses and played my flute on the riverbank like the infidel god. I was the Chanan river's own Kanhaiya, silhouetted every dusk against a sky burnished in the red-gold hues of the drowning sun, every grain of sand on the riverbank drenched in my music, every reed swaying softly to my tune.

'Father, this sweating and slaving in the fields like a beast of burden is not for me,' I told him, when the time came for me to start farming my portion.

'So be it,' he said.

I was made the chief cowherd of the clan, our hundred and twenty head of cattle my sole responsibility. My buffaloes, my flute, my cowherd's staff, the banks of the silvery Chanan—this was the life I was content to lead. A staff in my hand, strong thongs on my feet, a bamboo flute to my lips, a coarse shawl over my shoulders, a robust packed lunch in my bag. I would leave home at dawn with the herd and return only after dusk.

Every morning began with a bath in the cool river water. Leaving my clothes on the riverbank, I would plunge in for a swift swim, the river's strong current a challenge to my limbs. That done, I walked around till I found the finest bits of pasture for the herd to graze upon. While the cattle grazed, I would sit under the shade of some tree and eat my morning meal of stale bread with raw onions and green chillies, glugging down the accompanying pitcher of buttermilk in a few quick gulps. As morning turned to noon, and the coolness of water began to call out to the cattle, we headed back to the river. The buffaloes would sit about in the shallows, caked in wet mud, their bellies swollen and sated, their breath rising and ebbing, their bodies in communion with the spirit of the earth. On some afternoons I would search out conversation

with a boatman or with the occasional wise man who may have come down from the snow-clad Himalayan peaks for a short respite in the plains before disappearing again into his pristine cave. On others I would stretch out for a nap. My brothers' wives complained that I was unmindful of saying the five prayers that should ritually interrupt every man's day. But, in truth, my entire day passed like an unbroken prayer.

My music was the purest form of worship. I searched for the perfect bamboo reed and fashioned it into a flute. Placing my lips sideways against the wood, my breath blowing through its hollow length, my fingers lightly moving across it, my mind poised at the edge of existence, I pulled out the day's tune from the sky of all possibilities. I played with all my heart and for all I was worth, each time, every time. The buffaloes would fall into stillness, only their limpid black eyes alive to the music, glittering, sentient. The cows, the goats, the stray curs, the wandering mendicants, the boatmen on the river, the girls come to fill water, all of them would be drawn into the umbra of the music and become still. The trees, the birds nesting inside them, the clouds, the river rushes and reeds, all at rapt attention, listening to Ranjha on the riverbank playing his flute.

However, my growing reputation as a flautist in the surrounding villages disturbed my mother deeply. It wasn't a man's work, she despaired. Her disapproval burnt into me softly, with its steady, dull heat, like the ashes from the coal oven on which she cooked our meals. The ashes looked innocuous but I, who was inside their folds, felt their burn reaching my heart and singeing it.

'Let the boy follow his heart,' Father said.

'It is not without reason that the head and shoulders are placed above the heart in the human body. If you permit him to continue like this, mindless and irresponsible of life's demands, who will feed him once we are gone?' countered Mother.

'The All Seeing, Almighty Allah who feeds us all,' Father responded, his face wreathed in his customary smile, his gaze

conciliatory. He did not wish for this to become another reason for Mother's growing displeasure with me.

Mother's quiet anger could rage like the summer west wind, the hot and dry loo breeze, relentless and sapping when it was in season, reaching into the cool depths of the heart and leaving it dried out and shrivelled at the edges.

'What woman will take him for a husband?' she fumed.

'The very finest in the land. One who is noble enough to know that there is more to life than just the growing and eating of bread,' Father replied.

'Your leniency is spoiling him,' said Mother, banging the door behind her as she stormed out of the room.

'Better spoil than ruined completely,' said Father softly into the settling dust of her departure.

Mauju Chaudhary was a man way ahead of his time and amongst all of us who called him Father, I was certainly the proudest to do so. He knew so well the art of letting be, letting things prosper and flourish. He was all gentle rain, no threatening thunder or flashing lightning to his persona. There was not a single illiberal bone in his mighty frame.

However, destiny deploys life and death to play the game on its behalf. One sullen evening it rolled the dice of death without warning. The dove of father's soul rose up into the sky and became a tint of blue in the vast infinitude. Something ruptured in my heart and I felt that sad, moist evening's weight settle on my shoulders, never to leave again.

My time to leave Takht Hazara was approaching.

It could not be otherwise. I do not bemoan my mother's meagre love for me. I do not blame my brothers for their cupidity or their wives for their grasping greed. Kindness on their part would have only delayed the unfolding of my destiny. I needed to leave. How else would I have met Heer?

Better a hundred deaths for Heer than a life without her.

The world hates those who do not conform. It is easier to forgive liars and cheaters, thieves and murderers than to tolerate someone who does not aspire to the same things as others. To be loved and respected by his brothers, a man must want what his brothers want—ample land to his name, rich food on his table and a comely wife in his bed. To be indifferent to these is to cast a slur on their lives.

No story of brotherly discord can be complete without the treachery of women. Without my brothers' wives there might have been no departure from Takht Hazara. Men only fight to become heroes in their women's eyes. They only seek the trophies of land and gold to proffer them as offerings to their women. And women, what do they want? If only we knew that, all of our lives would be simpler.

To come into manhood in a large family full of women was no easy thing. Seven older brothers. Their seven wives (not to mention the occasional visits of the two married sisters and their husbands). Seven different couplings to break the silence of the nights I slept in. And in the day, seven pairs of breasts to keep my eyes from straying inadvertently. It was far simpler really to be the clan's cowherd than to hang around at home playing youngest brother. To leave at dawn and to return so dog tired at dusk as to be insensible to the snogging sounds that filled the night. I stayed clear of my sisters-in-law instinctively. I avoided both, the ones who sought to mother me and the ones who sought to make eyes at me from behind the dupattas they asked me to help them dry out in the courtyard.

Only with Sahiba, the seventh one, I erred. She was the nearest to me in age and I mistook her for a friend.

A favourite thing for my brothers' wives to do was to sit at the spinning parties with their friends, night after night, talking about my waywardness. The spinning circle is the bane of village life. It's not all love songs and raunchy jokes that the women sing and share, as they sit together spinning yarn. Nor is it just exchanges of sisterly sympathy about menstrual cramps and mothers-in-law, though that

too happens. Gossip is what keeps those wheels spinning well into the night.

Deedho has an extra serving of rice or buttermilk and he becomes a man of insatiable appetite. He throws a few coins at a beggar and he is profligate. He shares a quiet chillum with a sadhu on the riverbank and he is an addict without a future. He smiles and chats up a girl for a few minutes and he is a philanderer. A random woman, entranced by his music, sends him a love note written in her blood, her husband wallops her when he finds out and Deedho, who had nothing to do with the entire sequence of events, becomes a homewrecker.

Sahiba would come running to me with these freshly spun tales of my perfidy. And young and stupid that I was, I sat there mulling over them, trying to sift the lies from the truth.

Vain.

Flirt.

Wastrel.

That was the main thrust of the spinning circle's accusations against me.

Vain. Yes, I admired the fineness of my features, the bounce of my curls, the lightness of my gait, the dexterity and fluidity of my music, the vastness of my mind. What good is false humility? He who shuts his eyes to his own beauty becomes blind to the rest of the world's magnificence too.

Flirt. Not true. Many silly girls had feigned the act of fainting on the riverbank in the hope of being carried back home by me, but to hold me responsible for their dramas was ridiculous in the extreme.

Wastrel. Yes and no. Yes, if the only definition of work is ploughing the land, if the only tenable measure of a man's worth is the number of bushels of grain that he can extract from the earth's rough surface. Yes, if the jingling of coins in a pocket is considered more musical than the notes of sweet melody that rise out of a flute and into the air.

Egged on by their wives, and silently supported by my mother, my brothers went to great lengths to cheat me out of my fair share of our father's inheritance. Strange, when you consider that my part of the land was all theirs to cultivate anyway. All I ever asked in exchange was a bellyful of rice, some coarse bread and buttermilk, with a few slices of onion on the side. I was not asking for the food as alms either, for I looked after their cattle in its stead.

Yet, the qazi was called and bribed to measure out our lands and I was given the most inhospitable tracts to cultivate, land so hard that a bull would refuse to defecate on it. But the man of justice saw it fit to risk his eternal soul to cheat me of my rightful share. The village elders sagely sided with him and my brothers. The whole village lined up against a young man of twenty-odd summers. Why?

History would have you believe it was jealousy, sibling rivalry come to a head, for was not Deedho his father's favourite? But I don't think it was jealousy at all. It was fear. Raw, naked, frightened-out-of-its-silly-skin fear. That everything they were striving for was perhaps worth nothing. That they had got it all wrong and happiness wasn't fine clothes and many servants and pots of gold but notes of music teased out of the air and blown adrift again into the passing breeze. And thus gripped by this fear, they struck.

Sahiba dealt the final blow. A homely woman is more dangerous than an outright beauty. Her queenly ego, I was to find out, was no less lethal for being camouflaged by her scrawny figure and buck teeth. A woman should not be plain. It fools a man into dropping his guard.

'My friends tease me saying I must be in love with you. They say that's why I bring you hot food every day,' she said to me, one desultory noon as we sat beneath the reeds on the cool riverbank, a lone white cloud shaped like a headless horse floating aimlessly above us in the measureless blue of the sky. Fetching food for me was a practice she had begun when she came into the family. I had

been happy to go along. I thought it was her ruse to get away for a bit from my mother's dour disapproval.

'Well, if the gossip upsets you, just stop coming. That will shut them up real quick,' I said, taking one last gulp of the cool buttermilk before handing the urn back to her.

'You mean it's nothing to you that I have been bringing food for you, day after day, for the past two years? Just stop, he says. Just like that. Hired today. Fired tomorrow. Like I'm some kind of servant girl,' she spat out fiercely, standing with her hands on her hips, her nostrils flared in anger.

'Wait a minute before you flash those eyes at me!' I said. 'I'm not ungrateful but if it's getting you into trouble or spoiling your reputation, it clearly must stop, mustn't it?'

It would be silly for Sahiba not to heed the warnings being thrown her way, while they were still couched as jokes and harmless leg pulling. Gossip is society's watchman, wall and whip, all at once. Tale by malicious tale, rumour by rumour, the wall of society's narrow morality is erected. Inside it is the cosy warmth of belonging. Outside, it is brutally cold and lonely. Sahiba was better off on the right side of the divide.

'Oh, don't you worry, my beautiful brother-in-law, I've found an effective way of shutting them up. I told them you are to marry Habiba,' she laughed. 'I told them I'm just keeping an eye on my little sister's prospective groom till she comes to take charge of his lunch.'

I blanched at the thought of her little sister. She had been a freckled, straggly twig of a girl with a slight limp during the time of my brother's wedding two years ago. I was aware, of course, that time did magical things to scrawny teenaged girls, making them all curvaceous and comely, but in Habiba's case, time could try every trick and it would still fail. Besides, she giggled annoyingly and excessively. I was certainly not going to be brother-in-law twice over to Sahiba, whatever fond hopes she might nurse.

‘You must not tell such lies. It will be worse for you when you are found out,’ I said sternly.

‘But it’s all fixed,’ she said airily. ‘Your mother has agreed. She is happy with the terms my parents are offering.’

Oh, so that was it! I was being sold off for a fat dowry.

‘How dare you plot and plan behind my back,’ I said angrily. ‘Why would I marry some chit of a girl with more freckles on her nose than cells in her brain?’

That was a bit reckless and rude, I must admit. I saw Sahiba’s face heating up, the small red spots on her cheeks suddenly raging like a blistering noon, her face a summer storm.

‘My sister is not good enough for you, is it?’ she said. ‘Who are you going to marry then? Heer Syal?’

It was held in our parts that the women of Jhang were unrivalled in their beauty—light-eyed, fair-skinned, ruby-lipped, lissom and graceful—veritable fairies from heaven walking on earth. The finest amongst the Jhang women were the daughters of the proud Syals. Raised in the lap of luxury, they bathed from childhood in rosewater and milk; pastes of sandalwood and almonds, mudpacks from Multan, crushed saffron and sweet honey from the mountains of Kashmir and perfumes from Arabia made up their toilet. Only the finest silks and muslins touched their lovely bodies. The very finest, the most legendary beauty amongst these magnificent daughters of the Syals was Heer, the diamond among women.

My father’s words ran through my head. Only the finest woman in the land would do for me. If Heer was the finest, then Heer it would be.

‘A wastrel like you should be glad of whatever you can get,’ said Sahiba sourly, her lips curled into a sneer to underline what a worthless creature I was regarded to be, all around.

It hurt. I had thought of her as my best friend till then.

‘Yes,’ I said to her through gritted teeth. ‘Heer Syal shall be my wife. Tell my mother that, and my brothers too. Tell that to your gossiping friends in the spinning room. I will come back to Takht Hazara with Heer as my bride, or I will not return again to see their faces.’

Saying that, I left.

‘Deedho,’ she called after me frantically.

But I was hell-bent on being Deedho no more.

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Manjul Bajaj's *In Search of Heer* is one of ten books on the 2020 JCB Prize for Literature longlist.

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