

Sparrows

Khwaja Ahmad Abbas (1914-1987) was a screenwriter, novelist and film director. He got the Padma Shri award in 1969. He worked as a journalist for *The Bombay Chronicle* and wrote seventy-three books in English, Hindi and Urdu. *Inquilab* remains his best known work of fiction. His autobiography *I am Not an Island: An Experiment in Autobiography* was published in 1977. "Sparrows" is a short story on human transition. Everyone changes for good or bad. Abbas has shown both in this story.

Rahim Khan is the fifty-year old protagonist of "Sparrows". Despite his age, he was broad-shouldered and extremely strong. He is a vicious, merciless and brutal farmer who cares naught for his cattle nor his family. The villagers are too afraid to talk to him. Kallu calls him a "hard-hearted devil". Nanha, the sweet-seller, reports that he beat up poor Ramoo's child for throwing a stone at his oxen. Ramnath, the zaildar, says he had almost killed his mare for straying into his field. The patel adds that Rahim's sons have run away as they could not stand his cruelty. The neighbourhood children are terrified of him. That is why the villagers shunned him. Rahim Khan's house stood at the edge of the village, far away from the other huts. He beats his wife every day. His very air is haughty and unfriendly.

After a tiring day, Rahim Khan reaches his gaunt hut when the neighbour informs him that his wife had gone to her brother's house in Nurpur for a few days. Rahim actually expects his wife to run away. He is sure that she would never return as he had brutally assaulted her. He tied the oxen and sat down on the charpoy. He is extremely infuriated as there is no one to wash his hands and feet. He vents his anger on a poor little cat and flings it out of the house. He had beaten his wife for thirty years. His eldest son Bundu ran away six years ago. His young son Nuru ran away three years ago and joined his brother. His wife is the only one who put up with his cruelty.

Rahim Khan was once a kind-hearted cheerful young man. He was a talented wrestler and kabadi player. He fell in love with Radha, the daughter of Ram Charan who was the village banya. He wanted to marry Radha and join the circus. His greatest aim was to perform circus acrobatics. His parents killed his ambition. They said that circus was too lowly for a respectable farmer. And Radha was a Hindu girl. So it was impossible for them to get married. Rahim's father advised Ram Charan to marry his daughter off as she was already fifteen. Soon enough Radha was married off to Ram Lal, a middle-aged pot-bellied banya. She wept at first but soon accepted her fate. Rahim Khan was also married to a girl

chosen by his parents. He vowed vengeance on the society, on his parents and his poor wife on that day. He became cruel and heartless from that day on.

For thirty years, Rahim had ill-treated his wife, his sons and his oxen Nathoo and Chiddoo. Everyone hated him. No one understood his past. No one comforted his wife as beating was allowed by the society. She had submitted to him like a slave. She never questioned him. Rahim Khan was literally bored if a whole week went by without beating her. But now that she was away, he felt lonely. The next day, he decides to brush off the cobwebs in his home. He spots a sparrow's nest with two fledgelings inside. The parent birds try to attack him. His immediate reaction was to destroy the nest but something stopped him. He let them be.

The four sparrows become Rahim's only friends in the world. He names the young ones Nuru and Bundu after his sons. He offers them food. This went on for a while. The villagers are surprised to see him behave kindly to his bulls. Nathoo and Chiddoo are so happy as their backs healed. One rainy monsoon day, Rahim Khan returns home early and calls out the sparrows. He climbs up and notices a hole in the roof. The nest is pretty wet and the four sparrows are huddled together. Rahim Khan goes out, climbs the roof and mends it despite the rain. The next day, Rahim Khan wakes up with a high fever. He remains home for many days without going out to work. He is worried that his beloved sparrows might starve if he dies. The villagers call Rahim Khan's wife who comes the next day, weeping. The villagers break open the door to find Rahim Khan lying dead and the four sparrows fluttering around him.

A tiny thing can change people. Rahim Khan was not born cruel. Society has restricted his life and cut down his ambition. The cruelty that entered his heart was finally taken out by four sparrows. This shows that people can transform and that no one is inherently cruel. They just need time and more kindness to change.