The Worn-Out Bird

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It was ten o’clock in the morning. The tall iron gate in the high wall of the jail opened with a screeching sound, and a few prisoners came out with two guards. Such a crowd lodged in that dark dungeon, and outside, such open space and bright sunlight. Everything gets lost in this strange light. The eyes go blind in the glare.

Holding on to the grilled gate for support, Gurei straightened herself and looked around. There was a huge banyan tree in front of the jail, which had been a mute witness to more than a hundred years rolling on, one after another. With its branches, high and thin, extending all around, it has set up a colony teeming with life. It takes nourishment not only from the earth but also from the air by spreading out its innumerable leaves.

Gurei could not decide what to do or where to go. She sat down under the shady tree and put her small bundle down by her side. Two worn-out saris were all that she possessed. The guard was looking at her with sharp, suspicious eyes. When a prisoner is let out of jail, somebody should come to take him back. Has this woman no relative? Who knows where her daughter Malia was?

Many thoughts raced through Gurei’s brain. If she went back to her village, would she not be shunned and looked down upon by the people there? She is now an object of contempt and aversion to everybody, yet her
appearance is not terrible or repulsive like that of criminals. There is no bitterness in her mind. She has the face of a simple rustic woman. Gurei did not know how long she had been sitting there, lost in these thoughts. She decided to go to her village, whatever people might say, and find out the whereabouts of Malia.

On reaching the village, Gurei proceeded to the slum. She spotted Sanei’s mother a little ahead. Sanei’s mother had just come out of her house. She quickly averted her eyes, as if she had not seen Gurei coming, and concentrated on her work. Thinking that she might not have recognized her, Gurei introduced herself.

“Oh! Sanei’s mother! Don’t you recognize me? I am Gurei.”

“Gurei! So you have come out of the jail.” Sanei’s mother stared at her in surprise.

“Yes,” Gurei replied, her face turning pale.

“I’ll finish this work quickly. Then we’ll talk. You sit here,” said Sanei’s mother.

Gurei sat down. Events of the past flashed through her mind one after another. While still a child, she had lost her mother. Her father had brought her up by himself. Both father and daughter lived happily on whatever he earned as a rickshaw puller. He had pulled the rickshaw until he was old.

That memorable night, it had been raining. At nine o’clock, Gurei heard someone knocking at the door. Too young to sense the danger, she opened the door. Four or five men barged into the house. They gagged her and tied a towel around her face, sealing her mouth. Her father, too, was bound hand and foot. They had no pity for his old age. They took away all the vessels and money in the house. Then they raped her, one after another, and left.

The following day, she and her father lodged a complaint at the police station. Her father had recognized one of the assailants. He and all the other people in the village had urged the officer in charge of the police station: “Sir, please arrest the culprits and see that they are punished. Otherwise, no young woman will be safe in our village.” The inspector wrote down everything in his diary. He interrogated Gurei minutely. She had to state even unmentionable details. Then she was sent to the hospital for a medical examination.
The miscreants were arrested, but all of them were set free and declared not guilty within a few days. They roamed about in triumph, boasting that they had been proved innocent. They bragged that they were free to rape and get away with it.

Gurei’s father and their neighbours went to the police station to make inquiries but came back disappointed, baffled by the evasive replies of the police. “Such incidents are not uncommon. Does anything change? Then why are you making such a fuss about it? Those boys are the spoilt children of important men. The politicians need them for their survival. We have been ordered by a higher authority to release them.”

Her father and neighbours listened to all this in silence. They understood what the police said and did not dare say anything further. But Gurei could not understand. She wondered why the police could not bring to justice the beastly youths who had ruined her life for good and left her drenched in a pool of blood.

But still those villains were not content. They brutally murdered her father because he had lodged a complaint against them. In the eyes of the police, however, even this was a commonplace event. So the culprits went about with an air of complacency like the cat that had eaten the cream.

Poor Gurei could do nothing but curse her fate. The day they attacked her father, she had cried. Throwing herself on the emaciated body of her father, stretched out on the ground, stabbed in the chest and writhing in pain, she had wept uncontrollably, striking her head. Her wailing had moved the people around her. They could tell that the girl was not wailing simply as a ritual.

She was weeping from her heart.

She was weeping for her innocent old father, who had bravely tried to bring those scoundrels to justice and had paid for it with his life. She was weeping because of those who were thriving under the protection of the powers that had condemned her to life-long misery by letting off those debauched characters. She was weeping because of the depraved police officials who had quickly changed sides for their own self-preservation. She had been hurt repeatedly. Her whole body shook with anger. But she was helpless. It was not within her power to do anything. She was all alone in this wide world.
Still she pinned her faith on the red building—the police station. Her eyes were fixed on it. As God is the saviour of the unprotected, so are the police to the poor. The officer-in-charge is their god. Gurei decided to go see the inspector and confide everything to him. She would be at peace if at least the murderers of her father were brought to justice.

Mustering her courage, Gurei went to meet the police inspector, her mind full of hope, and told him her tale of woe. The inspector really turned out to be a ministering angel. It was like Lord Krishna coming to the rescue of Draupadi, moved by her cry of anguish. Patting her gently on the back, the inspector consoled her, saying, “Don’t worry. Where can those rascals go after murdering a man? They will be caught one by one. I shall not let them off. They shall remain in custody. But it will take some time. Come here occasionally to remind me.”

Days and months slipped by. Gurei went to the police station regularly. She lit many lamps with the prayer “God, let the killers of my father be caught.” She thought that on the day the culprits got the punishment they deserved, she would laugh to her heart’s content.

On one fateful day, she went to the police station as usual and noticed a change in the inspector. He closed the doors and windows of the room and said with a smile, “If you shout for help, I’ll send you to jail. Do what I say like a good girl and then I’ll help you in every way.”

Gurei offered no resistance. She meekly surrendered her body to the inspector, not out of love but out of fear. Nobody knew that it drew blood instead of tears from her eyes. Wiping her eyes with the corner of her sari, she swallowed her grief in silence.

One fine morning, the inspector got his transfer order and left. Another officer came in his place. Now Gurei realized her blunder. But to whom could she complain and against whom? Gurei lay awake the whole night long and could find no way out of her predicament. Life was not worth living. She carried a child in her womb. Everybody in the village would spit in her face. Still, she could not bring herself to abort the child or take her own life. She made a hard decision. She would live and, defying the whole world, give birth to the child.

Adjoining her house was that of Raghu Nayak, a widower without children. He must have been about fifty-three years old, a strongly built man who worked in a factory. For some mysterious reason, he had sympathy...
for Gurei and offered her shelter in his house. He proposed marriage to her and Gurei agreed. After the birth of her child, Gurei, too, started working in the factory. Both were earning wages and were happy. But their neighbours could not tolerate it. They started taunting Raghu Nayak and tried poisoning his mind. The child was of unknown parentage, and he had given a harlot the status of his wife. Everybody regarded Gurei with contempt. It was as though the atmosphere of Raghu Nayak’s house was stinking with dead rats, suffocating them with the foul smell. Whatever he did to cleanse the body of Gurei, washing it with sweet-smelling soap or drenching it with perfume, her body would continue to stink.

Raghu Nayak felt that it was all his fault. Why should he blame Gurei? He tried to drown his sorrows in drink. Returning home intoxicated, he would beat Gurei without any provocation. Gurei bore it all in silence. After all, he had extended a helping hand and given her refuge when she was in distress.

Rivers flood and recede, but there was no end to the grief that flooded her heart. She would try to wipe away the torrent of tears that burst forth uncontrollably and suppress her agony, but there was no indication that the storm in her life was abating. Drinking had ruined her husband’s health and fine physique. Within a few years, he had been reduced to an invalid.

One day while brushing her teeth, Gurei heard Sukuta Uncle telling her husband, “Have you heard the news, Raghu? It seems many liquor shops are going to be opened everywhere.”

Raghu said, “If so, liquor will be cheaper and available to everybody.”

Sukuta Uncle, who had a little education, said, “Unable to bear the pangs of hunger, poor people will only take liquor. They will run to the liquor shops day and night and die early.”

That very night, Raghu Nayak breathed his last on her breast. His life had been snuffed out. Gurei, now widowed and facing society with her illegitimate daughter, Malia, hardened her hands and feet and forced them into action.

One day, something unusual happened. There was a meeting in the village. Gurei attended it with Malia. Many of her neighbours, both men and women, were also present. Gurei could not follow the speeches that were being made. All she could make out was that some ladies and gentlemen
who were government officials had come to talk to them about the rights and safety of women. She put a question to one of them, and he gave the following reply: “The government is already aware of the need to ensure that women like you live in peace and prosper without facing any difficulty. This meeting is being held with that end in view.”

Gurei was very happy to hear this. Now at last, everybody was interested in the well-being of helpless women like her.

Gurei was saving up money for the marriage of her daughter. Malia was grown up and should be married off without further delay. Malia, too, was working in the factory. What is there to be ashamed of in earning one’s livelihood?

Sometimes Gurei was moved to pity when she looked at her daughter. Malia was smart and diligent. She was clean and sophisticated. She wore a gold chain around her neck. The earrings, studded with white stones, that she wore had been purchased for two rupees and still looked as good as new. When she put on a colourful sari, Malia could pass as a rich man’s daughter. She had to toil hard and face many problems because she was born to Gurei. That was her misfortune.

One day, Malia did not return home from the factory. In vain, Gurei searched for her everywhere. She sat up through the night with terror in her heart, wondering what terrible mishap had befallen the girl. After midnight, Gurei heard a knock on the door and opened it. There before her stood Malia. Gurei was nonplussed at the sight. “You, in this condition? Where have you been?” she asked the girl.

Malia squatted on the floor. Her clothes were dishevelled. There were marks of injury all over her body. Weeping, she recounted everything. “The clerk who pays us our wages told me you were dead, that you had been crushed under the machine. He duped me by saying this and took me with him. Then he locked me up in a room and raped me. His henchmen warned me that if I divulged this to anyone, they would kill both of us. Then they brought me here and went away.”

Gurei felt as if she had been struck by lightning. The flower she had carefully nourished and nurtured all these years had been nipped and crushed when it was in full bloom. With great tenderness, she wiped away the tears from her daughter’s eyes and tried to comfort her, saying, “Don’t cry, dear. Nothing will happen. I won’t tell anyone.”
Soon it was morning. Gurei concealed a knife in her sari and proceeded straight to the factory. After the shift, she went to collect her wages as usual with the other workers. As the clerk who was handing out the wages bent down, she suddenly pulled out the knife and plunged it into his body, shrieking like a madwoman: “Take this, sir! This is the knife of honour!” Gurei herself could not understand how she could do it without flinching. People around her thought she had gone mad.

But Gurei was smiling with contentment. At least one of the vipers whom the police and the guardians of law guarded and shielded had got the punishment he deserved at her hands; she had swooped down upon him like a hawk and squeezed the life out of him.

Before Gurei had time to reflect and decide if she was right or wrong in taking the life of a rapist, the police arrived and forcibly handcuffed her. She then realized that by stabbing the man to death in broad daylight, she had become a criminal in the eyes of society. She was no longer the Gurei of the past. She was now a murderer.

Since that day, she had been behind bars. Her case had been heard. Everybody in the court was of the opinion that her crime, committed in a fit of passion, was not unjustified, considering the treatment to which her daughter had been subjected. So she was not sentenced to death. Gurei felt that it would have been better if she had been sent to the gallows.

By now, Sanei’s mother had come out of her house. Gurei asked where her daughter, Malia, was. Sanei’s mother told her everything. While Gurei was in jail, some youths had forcibly taken Malia away, bringing her back after a few days. She had committed suicide.

Gurei clutched her hair in despair and sat down. Why hadn’t anybody sent word to her? Where could she go now? Back to jail? Maybe she could tend and water the plants in the jail garden. She would work hard, live like a bird in a cage and eat whatever she could get. But can anybody go to jail without being convicted and sent there?

Gurei stared blankly at the paddy fields. Thousands of furrows on the ploughed fields extending miles and miles ahead. But the furrows were all shallow. Perhaps she was not able to measure their depth. Golden fields of paddy could no longer thrive in this soil. And, in the same way, nobody here would protect young women like Malia. Everyone would express hollow sympathy and go about their business. The misty dream
in her sunken eyes became hazier. Everything was being washed away by a flood of tears—such a deluge, sweeping even God away.