

## **Spark of Light**

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But who are we asking, and why do we ask?*

—PHYLLIS WEBB

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*Spark of Light: Short Stories by Women Writers of Odisha*

Edited by Valerie Henitiuk and Supriya Kar

# Spark of Light

## Short Stories by Women Writers of Odisha

Edited by  
Valerie Henitiuk and Supriya Kar



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# *Introduction*

Valerie Henitiuk and Supriya Kar

A woman who pours “all the darkness within her” into a coffee mug, age slipping out of a body “like a tree shedding its bark,” a woman’s outbursts evoking “the smell of burnt chilies”—these are but a few of the many striking images that one encounters in the short stories collected in this book. Originally written in Odia, the language spoken in the eastern Indian province of Odisha, the stories span a period of more than a century—a period that witnessed the rise of the Indian independence movement, the expansion of education, and the demise of the British Raj, as well as the partition of India and Pakistan, persistent conflicts between Hindus and Muslims, and, more recently, the growth of regionalism and the impact of economic liberalization. Amidst the political and social upheavals of modernity, one constant has been an ongoing struggle to reconcile old and new, to arrive at some sort of integration, however uneasy, between customs and attitudes grounded in tradition and ideas and ways of life imported from the West.

These stories, written by women who are natives of Odisha, depict a world that, while continually in transformation, remains almost stubbornly familiar. Detailed in the stories are perennial themes in women’s lives—loving yet conflicted relationships; the difficulties and rewards inherent in the roles of mother, daughter, sister, and wife; the yearning for personal fulfillment and an independent life; the challenges of growing

old. But we also find poverty, religious intolerance, lawlessness, instability, and injustice. The characters in these stories must find their way in a world badly disfigured by human callousness and cruelty—quiet, cold-blooded indifference, as well as the hatred and violence that rob people of their dignity. Perhaps more than anything, what distinguishes these stories is their insistent honesty, their refusal to look the other way.

### The Odia Short Story: A New Medium of Expression

The opening story in this collection—Reba Ray’s “Sanyasi” (“The Mendicant”)—was the first Odia short story written by a woman to appear in print. “Sanyasi” was published in 1899 in the recently founded literary journal *Utkal Sahitya*, roughly a year after the publication of Fakir Mohan Senapati’s “Rebati,” generally regarded as the first short story ever written in the Odia language.<sup>1</sup> While very different, these two early stories both explore the theme of vulnerability within the dynamics of family and culture. “Rebati” tells the story of a young girl’s pursuit of learning, at a time when formal education was a male prerogative. When a series of calamities subsequently destroys her family, Rebati’s illiterate grandmother turns on her, blaming her for the ill winds of fortune. But if Senapati’s adolescent heroine is shown to be vulnerable to the oppressive weight of tradition, Ray’s male protagonist, Shiva Prasad, stands in no more enviable a position. Ray’s story dramatizes her hero’s inability, as a dutifully submissive son, to protect his young bride from his own vicious, domineering mother. In the end, after losing his newborn child and then his wife, he flees his home and becomes a wandering mendicant—a *sanyasi*.

Ray published her short stories in a range of journals, later collecting them in a volume titled *Shakuntala* (1904). She also left an impressive body of poems, the most notable of which were anthologized in 1903 in *Anjali* (Offerings). This literary pioneer founded and edited *Asha*, a women’s magazine, as well as the literary journal *Prabhata*, regularly penning essays on social issues for both. The spirit of rebellion is embedded in the names of these publications—*Asha* means “hope,” while *Prabhata* means “morning” or “daybreak.” In 1905, Ray founded the Model Girls’ High School in Cuttack (then the capital city of Odisha), the first school to provide high school education to girls in Odisha. Her writings reveal

a deep interest in women's issues, as well as other concerns of the day, including harmony among different religious sects, personal integrity, spiritual growth, and nationalism.

Around the turn of the century, short stories were beginning to be written and published in many other regional languages of India. As Sisir Kumar Das (1991, 303–4) points out, literary journals were in large measure responsible for the rise of the short story:

The growth of the short story was partly regulated by the growing demand for stories by the reading public who preferred a complete story to parts of novels serialised in journals and periodicals. The editors of various journals, therefore, encouraged the popular novelists of their time to contribute stories to each issue. The situation was very much similar to that in contemporary Europe and America where journals played a dominant role in the development of the short story.

In Odisha, the journals *Utkal Sahitya* (founded in 1897) and *Asha* (founded in 1899), as well as *Mukur* (founded in 1906), all catered to an emerging literate public, while offering a privileged space for both male and female writers to explore new literary forms, among them the short story.

In Odisha (as elsewhere), storytelling was traditionally a social activity, with tales from Sarala Das's fifteenth-century Odia version of the *Mahabharata* recited in temple courtyards or Jagannath Das's fifteenth-century *Bhagabata* read aloud by priests in a room known as a *bhagabata tungi*, which soon became a standard feature of Odishan villages (Nayak 2013). Such ancient tales and devotional poems, from which listeners could sometimes draw parallels with their own experiences, were an integral part of people's day-to-day lives. With the advent of printing, however, reading—essentially a private pursuit—rapidly became a popular recreation among the educated classes. The short story was, like the novel, a Western genre, and both brought with them a new focus on the everyday and on relationships among ordinary people. In contrast to traditional narratives—folktales, mythological stories, legends, oral histories—readers were now offered characters and situations that felt immediately familiar to them, grounded as they were in contemporary social and political realities.

These literary developments coincided with the rise of Odia nationalism, which reflected a growing rebellion against not only British colonial

rule but also the hegemony of Bengali language and culture.<sup>2</sup> Many writers were also Odia nationalist leaders and were eager to create a body of literature that would set Odisha apart from neighbouring Bengal, with its robust intellectual and literary traditions. Accordingly, they produced novels, plays, and poems that emphasized a distinctively Odia identity, along with short stories that did the same. Early in the twentieth century, nationalist sentiment was becoming a key theme in Indian literature generally, and plays and novels were imbued with patriotic fervour, while also engaging in social critique. While, initially, the short story was comparatively free of political elements, writers soon began to use the short story as a vehicle for the expression of dissent.

Like writers elsewhere in India, Odia authors were caught up in the political and social unrest of the early twentieth century, depicting in their works the old order giving way to a new one, with traditional values challenged by modern ideas. In addition, the domain of Odia literature ceased to be dominated by men, as more and more female writers began to express themselves in fiction and nonfiction, focusing on the shifting complexities of women's lives.<sup>3</sup>

### *Spark of Light: An Overview*

Owing to opportunities provided by the expansion of education during the late nineteenth century, women with the skills and confidence to express themselves through writing began to appear on Odisha's cultural scene. Although they came from various social classes and backgrounds, most belonged to upper-class, liberal families. Over the course of the century, more women would join their ranks, finding in the short story a powerful tool for not only self-expression and self-discovery but also critical reflection on their social and cultural surroundings, which so often threatened to submerge them. While it is impossible to discuss in detail each of the stories in this volume, we highlight a few recurring and interwoven themes below.

Several of the authors featured in this anthology explore how gender stereotyping limits the options available to women. In "Misery Knows No Bounds," by Sarojini Sahoo—a feminist writer who often deals candidly with the topic of female sexuality—we encounter a young girl who ends up trapped to her thighs in mud. Despite her apparently hopeless

situation, she remains convinced that she will be saved: this is not how she is destined to die. The heroine's transgression has been such a small thing, an understandable and virtually blameless action: in a natural desire to demonstrate that she possesses something of value, she brings to school a special pen that she received as a gift. When, on the way home from school, a classmate accidentally drops the pen into a weed-choked canal, the girl wades in to retrieve it, becomes trapped in the mud, and is then left alone as darkness gathers. Rejecting any passive, fatalistic response, the girl insists repeatedly that even if no one comes in search of her, she is going to survive this. After all, an astrologer has assured her that the real threat to her life will be fire. The reference brings to mind horrifying images related to bride burning, young women set aflame because their dowry is deemed inadequate, or the practice of *sati*, with widows coerced into immolating themselves on their husband's pyre. While the girl's response can be read as a defiant stance against the patriarchal forces that restrict women's options, denying them their rightful chance at a fulfilling and autonomous future, Sahoo problematizes her heroine's gestures toward agency by reminding us of the dangers—and the misery—that so many women today still face.

Other stories explore the experiences of women whose lives depart, for one reason or another, from the traditional female trajectory of devoted wife and mother. Basanta Kumari Patnaik's understated "In Bondage," for example, describes an unmarried woman who is treated like a maidservant by her brother's wife. Our nameless protagonist gradually awakens to the realization that, as an uneducated village woman with no husband and precious little family support, she barely registers as a human being. In Yashodhara Mishra's "The Trap," a divorced mother, haunted by memories of the abuse and neglect she had experienced in her marriage, clings to her son and cannot stop herself from nagging him, even though she is desperate to make the most of his all-too-brief vacation time. Although "A Kerchief of Sky," by Sanghamitra Mishra, begins by acknowledging the presence of primordial energy in all women, the daughter in this story opts to remain in a loveless marriage, as though unaware of her self-worth. Gayatri Sharaf's "A Mother from Kalahandi" presents us with a wife who finds that she is unable to have children. Despite her otherwise ideal marriage to a man who appears

to adore her, she eventually learns of his infidelity. Setting aside her initial heartbreak, she resolves to free the young village woman whom her husband had purchased to be his mistress and to raise their child as her own. And, in Chirashree Indrasingh's "Mother," a wife who has lost her baby son in a cataclysmic flood that has devastated the landscape becomes a symbol of life's renewal, her own ocean of milk nourishing the dreams and aspirations of all her people.

Needless to say, the threat of sexual violence, including rape, sometimes appears overtly, as female characters who lack the protection of a husband, money, or social status find themselves powerless against patriarchal privilege and the community's willful blindness to gender-based brutality. Both Binapani Mohanty's "Pata Dei" and Aratibala Prusty's "The Worn-out Bird" feature women who have given birth to a child as the result of rape and who fight back against their humiliation as best they can. The combative Pata defiantly chooses to face the world as a single mother, while, in Prusty's story, Gurei turns to murder to avenge the rape of her own illegitimate daughter. In contrast, in "The Vigil," written by Suprabha Kar some four decades before "Pata Dei," Malati—the "fallen woman" on whom the story turns—sees no choice but to end her own life.

Some stories turn on violence of a different sort. "They Too Are Human" is an unabashedly sentimental allegory about the senselessness of religious intolerance, with two young boys—one Hindu, the other Muslim—sacrificed by the adults who should be protecting them. As Sushila Devi's story unfolds, the opening scenes of innocent camaraderie give way to a violent riot, as the boys' respective communities, despite years of living peacefully side by side, turn on one another, caught up in the mounting Hindu-Muslim tensions that culminated in the partition of India and Pakistan. The power of these tensions to poison human relationships and disrupt the ordinary rhythms of daily life finds dramatic exploration in Sanjukta Rout's "Curfew," set during an outbreak of communal violence.

Other stories call attention to broader societal inequities, including poverty, corruption, and elitism. In "The Ring," by Pratibha Ray, a naïve older woman encounters kindness, indifference, and treachery in equal measure as she waits in vain for her son to awaken from a coma caused

by his fall from a rooftop while he was doing some work for a well-to-do neighbour. Paramita Satpathy's "Sin" describes a young child who is forced to bear the full weight of guilt for his entire family's destruction, simply because, through the most natural of instincts, he tried to help put food in the starving mouths of his siblings and parents. Unable to reconcile himself to innumerable injustices he witnesses, the male protagonist in Premalata Devi's "Man of the Century" embraces a life of crime, revelling in the death of moral principles and the worship of selfishness that herald the apocalypse. Corruption has spread its ugly web so insidiously among people that even creative artists such as writers, who are looked upon as society's conscience, have been caught up in it. In "A Writer's Alter Ego," Binodini Patra explores the hypocrisy of a writer who pretends to compassion but refuses to do a favour for a poor teacher who cannot suitably grease his palms—a man whose attitudes leave her questioning her own integrity.

"A Classic Image" offers another exploration of poverty and hunger, this time from the perspective of a narrator observing those around her as she waits for a train. She is taken aback when what seemed from a distance to be a black granite sculpture representing poverty turns out to be a very real family of beggars. Author Banaja Devi takes pains to avoid an overly simplistic binary: a wealthy woman waiting in the same train station gives generously to the family from the treats she has brought along for her son, who is on crutches, having lost a leg. As Devi suggests, there are "insects in every beautiful flower"—no neat division exists between fortune and misfortune. The story is a moral meditation on social responses to the perennial issue of poverty, a form of suffering so profound as to turn even sympathetic individuals to stone.

Madness, whether it is the result of a devastating calamity or an attempt to identify and communicate a more personal, internal trauma, comes up as a theme several times. The bereaved and poverty-stricken mother in "Ruins," by Gayatri Basu Mallik, is an object of equal parts pity and revulsion as she pathetically repeats over and over her final words of warning to her sons, all three of whom she lost in one tragic turn of fate. Susmita Rath's "The Sound of Silence" reminds us that feelings of despair and powerlessness may take unexpected forms. In Rath's story, a young woman, recently married to a man who doesn't

want her, silently expresses her anger and unhappiness through her body: she is incapacitated by noxious odours that she alone can smell. The story closes on a profoundly pessimistic note, as the suffering wife ends up cruelly exploited by her cynical husband, who, oblivious to her emotional pain, effectively denies her humanity.

Greed and its repercussions also make an appearance in “The Mystic Bird,” by Archana Nayak, a story that concerns the construction of the Balimela Dam, in south-western Odisha, which flooded much of the Chitrakonda region. The narrative revolves around a man named Singua, who belongs to the Keya, a tribal people living in the area. When Singua is still a young boy, his father, who has a smithy, is drawn into earning a living by cutting off the chains of escaped criminals. The father is eventually arrested, leaving the family in desperate straits. By chance, Singua learns about a rare bird, which could lead him to a root endowed with the power to sever bonds—offering him a way to return to his father’s lucrative practice. He stalks the bird, but the result is utter catastrophe. Singua is left blaming his own greed for the ensuing destruction of the landscape on which his people depend for their survival, and yet, as the story suggests, the real guilt lies elsewhere.

Another story with fantastical elements, albeit addressed in a very different manner, is Supriya Panda’s “Moonrise.” Each New Year’s Eve, Sujata, the heroine, receives letters from the ruffians who once broke into her home with the intention of murdering her. This tale unfolds in a dreamy fairytale atmosphere, despite the very real threat of violence, thereby managing to subvert our every expectation. Her grandfather clock, her postbox, and her oven engage in dialogue with Sujata, a baker beloved by the local children, whose parents simply cannot keep them away from her home or her delicious confections. A talented artisan and someone on whom her community depends, she is nonetheless taken for granted. Panda presents us here with a feminine variation on the Pied Piper theme. Rather than complain about or punish those who transgress against her, Sujata responds with altruism and wishes them “safe passage.” Grief and loss are turned to victory, cruelty to kindness, victimhood to power.

Other stories are woven around a world of fantasy that abruptly comes crashing down. In the ironically titled “A Fistful of Hope,” by Golap



Manjari Kar, readers are led to consider, in chilling detail, the experience of being physically disabled in a corrupt and uncaring system where love proves wholly inadequate. Mamata Dash's "The Lotus Man" takes us inside the mind of an educated young woman whose mother had dreamed of a better life for her but who finds herself trapped as the mistress of a brutal, jealous man. A mysterious lover made of lotus blossoms offers her temporary escape into a dream world of passion. Fantasy again bumps up against harsh reality in "Shadows of the Moon," in which Mona Lisa Jena (as both author and translator) unshrinkingly—but with considerable empathy for very human foibles—exposes a figure of romance as a liar and cheat.

One defining feature of the short story, as Edgar Allan Poe once pointed out, is that it can be read in a single sitting—and the microstory (sometimes called "flash fiction") typically demands less than a minute of a reader's time. Although the most famous example—"For sale: Baby shoes, never worn"—is said to have been written in the 1920s, the microstory seems an appropriate genre for a twenty-first-century readership forever in a rush and fully accustomed to texting and tweets.<sup>4</sup> At the close of this collection, Pallavi Nayak and Deepsha Rath each offer their own lyrical examples of the form—what the latter memorably called "droplets"—no less hard-hitting for their brevity.

It goes without saying that these authors, born from 1875 through to the relatively late twentieth century, do not speak with anything like a unified voice. Rather, they offer an idiosyncratic spectrum of viewpoints, writing styles, and motifs, challenging us to let go of our preconceptions and respond to each author in turn. At the same time, despite the determined efforts of many characters to rebel and escape, themes of desperation and futility run throughout the collection, creating an almost oppressive atmosphere. More often than not, the stories reveal a bleak moral and spiritual landscape, fleetingly illuminated by moments of joy and tenderness—by a precious few sparks of light in the otherwise impenetrable darkness.

### Of Differing Aesthetics

In the foreword to his acclaimed novel *Kanthapura* (1938), Raja Rao comments on the almost breathless tempo of life in India. Although he is

speaking of the challenge of capturing this tempo in English, his comment holds true of writing in any of India's numerous languages:

We, in India, think quickly, we talk quickly, and when we move we move quickly. There must be something in the sun of India that makes us rush and tumble and run on. And our paths are paths interminable. . . . The *Puranas* are endless and innumerable.<sup>5</sup> We have neither punctuation nor the treacherous "ats" and "ons" to bother us—we tell one interminable tale. Episode follows episode, and when our thoughts stop our breath stops, and we move on to another thought. This was and still is the ordinary style of our storytelling. (Rao [1938] 1967, vii–viii)

For readers who are accustomed to a more leisurely approach to narration, this brisk tempo can seem somewhat disorienting, with one scene giving way to another before readers are quite ready. As Rao notes, however, implicit in this almost frenetic quality is the experience of life in India. In terms of narrative structure, many of the stories achieve their impact through a sequence of relatively brief and often seemingly insignificant episodes that lead up to a dramatic moment of revelation, in which the emotional force of the story is distilled into a single symbolic action: a sister being introduced as a maidservant ("In Bondage"), an elderly woman removing the silver ring from her dead son's finger ("The Ring"), Sattar releasing the chickens from the hut during a curfew ("Curfew"), a little girl dancing away in Sobha's dream ("The Trap"), or Bunu hammering at the chicken's head with a slab of stone ("Sin").

Especially in the relatively early stories, the often quite intricate plot is elaborated through scenes that may seem melodramatic, in which characters rarely hide their emotions and little is left to the imagination. This tendency to spell out emotion is far from exclusive to this literature, however; it can be traced to the narrative style employed in traditional drama and dance. Classical Odishi dance, for example, is known for its use of *abhinaya*, whereby the emotions expressed in the accompanying music or songs are conveyed through the dancer's hand gestures (*mudrās*) and facial expressions. In the West, this stylized approach to the portrayal of emotion, which was commonplace in its tradition until the early twentieth century, has since given way to the understated naturalism that has come to dominate Western literature (as well as acting). It is thus helpful to

remember that what many Western readers today regard as melodrama was not always perceived as such. Rather, the heightening of emotion facilitated the audience's involvement in the action and thus contributed to catharsis.

While these stories may at times seem to violate Western assumptions about how "literature" should behave, we would argue that differences in content, form, and style are to be acknowledged and celebrated rather than held in suspicion, rooted as they are in the distinct traditions within and against which Indian authors are writing. Raised to believe that women should not speak their minds openly, and typically denied a place in male-dominated literary circles, female writers in Odisha, as in India generally, found in the short story a means of subversion and protest, often masking what is in fact sharp criticism behind a layer of irony and symbol. The multiplicity of voices in the stories collected here—sentimental, submissive, even pathetic, but also rebellious, firm, and bold—capture the predicament of those who live on the margins, those whose views are deemed irrelevant but who are nonetheless determined to be heard. By inviting us to expand our literary horizons, these stories also offer a comparative perspective from which to appreciate world literature more fully.

### **Odia Literature in English Translation**

While the translation of texts into Odia can be traced back to the fourteenth century—it was, in fact, through the translation of Sanskrit texts that Odia came to be standardized—translation in the other direction has been nowhere near as robust. A collection of poems by Sachi Rout Roy appeared in English in 1942, but most scholars consider 1987 the year that Odia writing landed on the world stage—the year that Gopinath Mohanty's novel *Paraja* (1945) was published in English by Oxford University Press. Bikram K. Das's translation of that text has been termed "a decisive turning point in the history of transmission of Odia literature, opening up new vistas and drawing the attention of critics and readers outside" (Kar 2009, 18). Significantly, two years later, the first Sahitya Akademi Award (the Indian government's prestigious literary prize) in the English Translation category was conferred on this book.

The spread of Odia literature in translation is part of a broader movement: over the past several decades, Indian literature in translation has

undergone what Rita Kothari (2003, 2) calls “an unprecedented rise,” from “a marginal event to a pervasive trend.” Alongside the growing popularity of Indian writing in English, represented by such well-known authors as Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, and Aravind Adiga, tremendous energy has been devoted to translating Indian literature into English. The audience for this literature is twofold: while English-speaking audiences in other countries gain access to these texts, so do other groups in India, a country home to an almost dizzying array of languages and dialects in which English has long served as an essential link language as well as a lingua franca. As Kothari remarks, “Despite being a colonial relic and a neo-colonial instrument, English also functions today as an Indian language and fits into India’s linguistic universe without causing too much heartburn” (2003, 29). As she suggests, the recent increase in English translation activity strongly suggests the possibility of “a more dialogic, mutually profitable relationship” (26), not only among previously isolated cultural communities in India but also across international borders.

Although, as mentioned earlier, writings by women of Odisha began to be published as early as the turn of the twentieth century, it was not until the 1970s that many of these authors found venues where they could make their voices heard, and only much more recently did their work begin to be translated for foreign audiences. The first significant effort to present to English readers the imaginative world of women writers from Odisha was *Under a Silent Sun: Oriya Women Poets in Translation* (1992), edited by Jagannath Prasad Das and Arlene Zide, which brought together more than one hundred poems by thirty-seven poets. In prose, however, the first anthology to appear was *Oriya Women’s Writing: Essay, Autobiography, Fiction* (1997), compiled by a group of editors: Ganeswar Mishra and Paul St. Pierre, along with Arun K. Mohanty, Jatindra K. Nayak, and Trilochan Misra. Since the editors wished to emphasize the formal diversity of women’s writing, this slender volume, now out of print, includes one essay, two excerpts from autobiographies and three from novels, and five short stories.

Sachidananda Mohanty’s *Early Women’s Writings in Orissa, 1898–1950: A Lost Tradition* (2005) presents largely unknown work by twenty women who wrote during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—a period when women’s writing dealt with not only questions of gender and

identity but also contemporary cultural, political, and ideological issues. The anthology spans a wide range of genres—poetry, essays, short stories, excerpts from novels and autobiographies, and letters. These works had never before appeared in Odia-language anthologies, and many had long lain scattered in journals that were no longer in circulation.

Another significant contribution is *The Voyage Out: Contemporary Oriya Short Stories by Women* (2007), edited and translated by Sumanyu Satpathy. In the preface, Satpathy explains that his book

attempts to showcase the sharp departure that many Oriya women writers have made over a period of time: their moving away from cocooned domesticity and confinement within the patriarchal structures to the transgressive domains of alternative sexualities and inter-personal relationships. . . . What is common to most, if not all the stories collected here, is a kind of writing back to the patriarchal centre, to use a much-used feminist term. (11)

The twelve contemporary short stories included in *The Voyage Out*, all of which feature women in the role of protagonist, map out new areas of female sexual experience, including homosexuality, and explore various avenues of resistance to an oppressive patriarchal value system.

We had the pleasure, in 2010, of co-editing an anthology titled *One Step Towards the Sun: Short Stories by Women from Orissa*, published by the Bhubaneswar-based Rupantar Centre for Translation, which exists to promote Odia literature in English translation. The collection, which contained twenty-five stories, met with an enthusiastic response locally, with reviews appearing in various newspapers and journals. Twenty of the original twenty-five stories are reproduced here, along with six additional ones, including Reba Ray's "The Mendicant," which, despite its importance to the history of women's writing in Odia, was previously unavailable in English. In the present anthology, our goal was to present to an English-speaking audience a selection of short stories, all written by women, but dealing with a broad range of themes and situations, not all of which turn on issues of gender. We also wished to illustrate various styles of narration, in hopes of producing a representative sample of the short story as conceived and interpreted by Odishan women.

With this anthology, we aim to contribute to the dialogue enabled by the process of translation in hopes of collapsing the distance between

women in Odisha, writing in Odia, and English-speaking audiences both in other parts of India and elsewhere in the world. It should be borne in mind that reading in translation is necessarily a particular type of reading, at a distance from the original author and her text. Yet the translator's contribution to the wealth of literature available to us and to our reading pleasure should never be underestimated. After all, we tend to

talk without irony of enjoying Dostoyevsky, or Bei Dao, or Gabriel García Márquez, when what is often meant is that we have read them in mediated form, in words crafted by someone else entirely. . . . Avoiding translated works from some misguided sense that they are a mere crutch or even a betrayal of the original results in a parochial outlook, with the majority of the world's literary production necessarily remaining off limits. (Henitiuk 2012a)

Translation is anything but straightforward. Faced with the task of transposing meaning, mood, and literary style from one language and cultural idiom to another, translators necessarily make countless choices. Some strive to remain as close to the original as possible, while others translate more freely, seeking to capture the overall force of the original even if this requires taking certain liberties with, for example, sentence structure.<sup>6</sup> While it may not be difficult to spot a bad translation, the question of what constitutes a "successful" literary translation has no single answer, and the answers that exist are frequently quite subjective.

In postcolonial contexts, the act of translation into the language of the colonizer is inevitably bound up with the legacy of imperialism and the ongoing domination of minority cultures by the culture of those who wield power, as well as the continued subjugation of women by men. In the face of this imbalance, we firmly believe in the value of ensuring that the voices of female artists from all parts of the globe will be heard. Until recently, authors in Odisha have had few English-language outlets for their writing, and such a wealth of literature still remains invisible to those who cannot read Odia. Furthermore, once made available in English, these short stories have a far larger potential readership and may even be subsequently translated into other tongues. It is our sincere hope that this volume will assist in bringing to the fore these and other women writing in Odisha and that, given this brief taste, English-speaking readers will demand—and be offered—a great deal more.

## Notes

1. A staunch defender of Odia cultural identity and the author of four novels (in addition to numerous other works), Fakir Mohan Senapati is generally regarded as the father of modern Odia literature. He is known for his embrace of social realism, as “Rebati” well illustrates. Like Ray’s “Sanyasi,” Senapati’s story appeared in *Utkal Sahitya*, which was founded in 1897 by writer and editor Viswanath Kar. The term *sāhitya* means “literature”; *Utkal* refers to the ancient kingdom of Utkala, which once occupied the northeastern part of what is today Odisha and was renowned for excellence in the arts and crafts.
2. For an in-depth discussion of the nationalist movement, see Nivedita Mohanty’s *Oriya Nationalism* (2005). Until 2011, Odisha was known as Orissa, and the language, Odia, was called Oriya. As is very often the case, the name of the language was also the name of the speakers of the language and, by extension, their culture. “Odia” thus refers, as a noun, to the language itself, and, as an adjective, to both the language and the cultural identity of its native speakers.
3. Male writers were caught up in these changing attitudes as well. For example, of the dozen short stories published by Fakir Mohan Senapati, at least five have women’s issues at their core.
4. This elliptical but devastating short short story has traditionally been credited to Ernest Hemingway, although the attribution is now widely considered apocryphal. See, for example, Josh Jones, “The (Urban) Legend of Ernest Hemingway’s Six-Word Story: ‘For Sale: Baby Shoes, Never Worn,’” *Open Culture*, 24 March 2015, <http://www.openculture.com/2015/03/the-urban-legend-of-ernest-hemingways-six-word-story.html>.
5. The *Purānas* (from the Sanskrit *purāna*, ‘old’) are compendia of legends, myths, histories, traditional teachings, and assorted other material. They were compiled over centuries, chiefly in Sanskrit, from ancient times through to the medieval period.
6. For an illustration of how translators read and render differently, see the fifty translations of a passage from Sei Shōnagon’s *The Pillow Book* (*Makura no sōshi*) in Henitiuk (2012b).

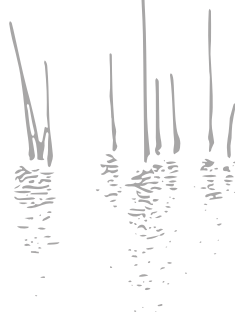
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# Spark ● of Light





# *The Mendicant*

Reba Ray

Translated by K. K. Mohapatra

## I

A destitute woman had recently taken shelter in Nityananda Patnaik's home in Jajpur, along with her six-year-old daughter. The widow of a *zamindar*, she was from the same caste as Nityananda. Three years earlier, her husband had lost everything in a lawsuit and, overwhelmed by the pangs of poverty and bouts of depression, he had lost the will to live. Those three years had been a harrowing time for her. Finally, when she had absolutely nowhere else to go, Nityananda had offered to let her and her daughter, Parasamani, live in his home.

Nityananda had worked in the treasury office in Cuttack and was now on a pension. He had also inherited a small *zamindari*, and lived quite comfortably. His was a small family—a wife, Ushabati, and son, Shiva Prasad. An only child, Shiva Prasad had arrived after years of dedicated prayer to Lord Shiva, and so it was appropriate that he had been named in honour of the god. When the boy was thirteen, Nityananda had sent him off to stay with one of his friends in Cuttack so that he could get a proper education.

Nityananda's wife, Ushabati, was as proud, foul-mouthed, and haughty as her husband was gentle, calm, and collected. After moving

in, Parasamani's mother dutifully attended to every chore around the house, but no amount of slave labour seemed to satisfy Ushabati. On the contrary, the poor woman was frequently singed by the raging flames of the mistress's anger. Even little Parasamani was not spared; she too had to put up with slaps, blows, and pinches. God Almighty be praised for bestowing on the lowly and ill-fated enormous reserves of patience! What would happen to such poor souls without their ability to put up with their misfortune? No doubt it was just as well that Parasamani's mother accepted every bit of humiliation without protest. Nityananda was blissfully unaware of the entire situation—not that he would have had the power to change it had he known.

When Shiva Prasad came home for the Durga Puja holidays, he was delighted to have Parasamani around. As an only child, he had been lonely for as long as he could remember. He was a kind and quiet boy, which made it easy for Parasamani to take to him.

One day, seated beside Shiva Prasad while he was studying, she blurted out—whether out of childish enthusiasm or some deep-seated desire Lord only knows—"I wish I could study too." Immediately, Shiva Prasad found a copy of *Barna Bodhak*, a reading primer, and began to teach her. Until he left for Cuttack at the end of the holidays, he guided her through her lessons every afternoon, encouraging her to read and to write the alphabet and simple words with a piece of chalk. In just twenty days or so, Parasamani mastered nearly half of *Barna Bodhak*. But it all stopped in mid-stream, when Shiva Prasad went back to Cuttack.

Six months passed. Shiva Prasad returned home for the summer vacation. Parasamani's studies resumed, and, after finishing *Barna Bodhak*, she started on *Bodhadayak*. One day, Ushabati chanced upon her son teaching the girl and gave them both a tongue-lashing, as unnecessary as it was vitriolic. From then on, Parasamani did not seek Shiva Prasad out; she studied by herself.

Besides being a fair-skinned beauty—hardly anyone around could hold a candle to her—the girl was so graceful and well-mannered that everyone immediately fell for her. Perhaps because he did not have a daughter of his own, or because he was naturally generous of heart, or just because Parasamani's sweet, innocent face was difficult to resist, Nityananda never missed a chance to express his affection for her. But

sadly, despite her charms, the girl failed to gain even the smallest place in Ushabati's heart.

## II

Through times good and bad, five years passed, drowned in the boundless depths of Time. Many were lifted out of the darkness of despair and propelled toward the blinding illumination of happiness, just as others were deprived of the nectar of joy and happiness and submerged in the bottomless ocean of grief and sorrow. Who could count the number of humans Time sent, despite their wishes, to their deaths, just as it showered the elixir of happiness on a grieving world by bringing forth a bountiful crop of babies as lovely as fresh flowers?

But whether times were good or bad, not much changed in Nityananda's family. One of the good things that happened, though, was that Shiva Prasad passed his First Arts examination and returned home. Ushabati's fondest wish was to get her son married, and she began to pester her husband day in and day out.

One day, Nityananda took her aside and said, "Place your hand on my head and swear you will not refuse my request." She hesitated, but let herself be convinced. "When Parasamani was just two years old," Nityananda told her, "I once met her father on some business. One look at the child and I thought to myself, God willing, someday I'll get our son Shiva Prasad married to her. So intense was my wish that I let her father in on it, and we both swore we'd not let it be otherwise, even if one of us died in the meantime."

It was as if Ushabati had been struck by lightning. "Is that why you asked me to place my hand on your head and swear?" she exclaimed. "What will people say if I accept Parasamani as my daughter-in-law? Aren't there many beautiful girls around? How can I settle for a girl whose mother doesn't have a single coin to offer as dowry? You want me to give my son in marriage to a girl whose mother works as a servant in this house?" These and many other arguments spewed forth in vehement protest.

Nityananda listened to it all in silence. "I cannot go back on my word," he said quietly. "If you're unwilling, you may do as you please. But you'll be on your own when it comes to arranging your son's marriage."

For eight or ten days afterwards, husband and wife did not speak to each other. Ushabati vented all her anger on Parasamani and her mother, who soon learned what was going on.

In the end, with no other solution in sight, Ushabati gave her consent.

On an auspicious day and at an auspicious hour, the holy union between Shiva Prasad and Parasamani was solemnized. Nityananda was euphoric: he had kept his word. Parasamani's mother was ecstatic at the thought that the best possible match had been made for her adored daughter. Ushabati, alone, was unhappy.

And then what about the newlyweds? Did they feel blessed and happy to have found each other?

### III

After the wedding, despite the boy's earnest wishes, Nityananda did not let Shiva Prasad return to Cuttack to continue his studies. Shiva Prasad tried, not once but two or three times, to find a job, but he had to abandon the idea because of his father's opposition. No one knows exactly what arguments Nityananda marshalled in favour of his position.

Ushabati was an angry sort by nature, and what's more, much against her wishes, Parasamani had become the daughter-in-law in the household. No wonder the rage she felt toward the poor girl intensified. Parasamani's slightest lapse provoked such disproportionate anger that Ushabati could not get over her old habit of raising a hand to the girl. Once, Parasamani, dead tired, let her eyes close for a few seconds while preparing the evening meal, and, rather than subjecting her to the standard beating, her sweet-tempered mother-in-law simply poured a pitcher of cold water over her.

Parasamani's mother learned to keep quiet, even as she witnessed her daughter's misery. And Parasamani herself remained as silent as a deaf-mute, drowning her sorrows in her mother's affection and her husband's love. At fourteen, young girl though she was, she worked tirelessly, but with the utmost trepidation, from dawn to two hours past dusk, attending to chores of all kinds while putting up with her mother-in-law's curses and beatings. The brief words of love and solace she received from

her husband at the end of the day, before she offered herself up to a restful slumber, made her feel like the luckiest woman on earth.

The ill-treatment his wife received from his mother did not escape Shiva Prasad's notice, and although he could not say a word to his mother, one day he told his wife, "I know how miserable you are, how tormented you are, when my mother speaks to you so cruelly. But it is my loving request that you not take her unkind words to heart."

"How can one who has your love be bothered by anything?" Parasamani replied. "Besides, sometimes I do make mistakes and deserve what comes to me."

One day, Parasamani came down with a fever. She lay in bed in her mother's room, and when, after five or six days, the fever showed no sign of abating, Nityananda called in a *vaid*—a country doctor—who took her pulse and wrote out a prescription. During all this time, not once did Ushabati step inside the room to see how her daughter-in-law was doing. Parasamani's mother used the short breaks between her various household chores to take some food to her daughter—toasted rice flakes, ginger, salt, and pureed puffed rice. Without telling his mother, Shiva Prasad, too, went some three or four times to see his wife. After Parasamani recovered, Ushabati took her son to task for his shamelessness—visiting his wife in the middle of the day. Only God knows precisely what she said, but Shiva Prasad was deeply wounded.

Five or six days later, he begged his father to let him visit Cuttack, saying how much he missed the town and how badly he needed to see it again. Nityananda finally agreed, but only to a visit of a few days. It was decided that between the coming Tuesday night and Wednesday dawn would be an auspicious time for him to set out.

On the eve of his departure, Shiva Prasad begged his wife to take care of her health. She was with child. Husband and wife held each other a long time, crying silently. At daybreak, Shiva Prasad took leave of his parents and everyone else and started on his journey.

He was able to stay with a friend in Cuttack and wrote to his father to give him the news. Within a fortnight, he had landed a fifty-rupee-a-month job, which he accepted. He was in no hurry to return his family home. This chance at independence was exactly what a doctor would have prescribed an ailing man.

Four months after Shiva Prasad left, Parasamani gave birth to a baby boy. Nityananda conveyed the happy news to Shiva Prasad. But the child's family was not destined to enjoy this happiness for long: the newborn deserted his mother's lap while she was still confined to the women's quarters and returned to the fairyland whence he had come, plunging the entire family into an ocean of grief and tears. Parasamani came down with a fever almost immediately, from which there was no relief for the next fifteen days.

When he received the sad news, Shiva Prasad yearned to be with his wife, but he was reluctant to apply for leave from the job he had so recently taken.

Nityananda called in *vaid*s and doctors to treat his daughter-in-law, but to no avail.

One day, quite secretly and with much difficulty, Parasamani wrote her husband a letter:

Dearest,

Your poor one longs to see you one last time before she leaves this world. Can I beg you to come home and help your servant fulfill her last wish—to rub the dust from your feet on her head before dying?

Forever yours,

Parasamani

She entrusted the letter to her mother, asking her to place it in an envelope with a postage stamp and find a trustworthy woman to take it to the post office.

Parasamani's letter moved Shiva Prasad so deeply that he requested a week's leave and rushed home.

It was as if the flickering flame of Parasamani's life had been awaiting one last glimpse of her husband's face. For once, Shiva Prasad, past caring what his mother would think, went straight to his wife the moment he reached home. The poor girl burst into convulsive sobs when she caught sight of him.

She beckoned to him to approach her deathbed, and, when he did, she took his right hand and clasped it to her chest. "How I had looked forward to placing your son in your lap when you came home! Not only did



my wish not come true—it will remain forever unfulfilled. This is our last meeting in this life, and I pray to God that I may have you as my husband in my next.”

Parasamani spoke these few words with the greatest effort. Silent tears streamed from Shiva Prasad’s eyes and drenched his wife’s hands. Parasamani’s mother rushed to her daughter’s bedside, wailing bitterly. Hearing her, Nityananda and Ushabati, too, rushed in. Parasamani asked each of them to bless her with the dust from their feet. After she had covered her head with it, she looked longingly at her husband one last time and passed away.

Only two months later came yet another bereavement: Parasamani’s mother, grieving over the death of her only child, followed her into the other world. Was all this predestined, willed by God? Who could have changed any of it?

Shiva Prasad did not go back to Cuttack. He withdrew and kept to himself. His parents wanted to see him marry again, with no delay.

In a short time, a suitable match was found. The girl was the daughter of a wealthy man, and Ushabati was elated, viewing the match as the fulfillment of her true wishes—all the wishes that had eluded her grasp when Shiva Prasad had married Parasamani. Soon, preparations were afoot for a wedding only the following month.

Even though Parasamani was no longer alive, Shiva Prasad constantly felt her presence. She was always there, laughing gently, extending her hands toward him, begging for his love and affection. So when he learned of the plans for a second marriage, he did not hesitate for a moment to tell his mother right out: “I’m not going to marry again. Don’t you people even think of it.”

His mother was stunned, as if felled by a blow. “Son, even old dotards marry two or three times. You’re a young man, but you refuse to remarry? What will happen to us if you don’t? We’ll simply perish.” She used all sorts of arguments—some harsh, some sweet.

But Shiva Prasad was unmoved. “I won’t marry again.”

When the matter reached Nityananda’s ears, he, too, thought that these words had issued from his son’s lips but not from his heart and that he would be reconciled to the idea once the marriage had taken place.

The wedding day dawned. It was already eight in the morning, but there was no sign that Shiva Prasad had arisen. Wondering why, one of his relatives went to his room. Not finding him there, he searched the whole house. When the matter was brought to Nityananda's attention, he also began looking everywhere for his son and sent out search teams as well. Ushabati's tears of joy soon turned into tears of anguish.

The people sent out to search all returned dejected. The festive occasion became a dark day, full of agony and despair. Nityananda and Ushabati cursed themselves and cried until they were hoarse. The light had gone out of their home.

Although Shiva Prasad had expressed his unwillingness in no uncertain terms, he realized that his parents would overrule him and go ahead with the second wedding. So, on the night before the wedding, after everyone had gone to bed, he put together a few clothes and a little money and left home. Uncertain where to go, he set out on the road to Cuttack. But he felt uneasy about remaining there, aware that his father would soon get wind of where he was. So he left for Calcutta, and it was there that he experienced a sense of relief. Not immense, unalloyed relief, but relief nevertheless. His more immediate worry was how to face the future.

A month passed. His money ran out. He had not met anyone in the city who could help him out with a loan of ten or fifteen rupees to tide him over. One day, tormented by worries and anxiety, his hands clasped over his heavy heart, he was sitting in his room when he heard someone singing in the next room. He was so drawn to the music that he went next door and sat beside the singer, plying him with requests to go on.

The last song was one of renunciation and nonattachment. It touched Shiva Prasad to the core, changing his life in an instant. The song was like a beacon, showing him the direction he should take.

The next morning Shiva Prasad donned the robes of a mendicant. Chanting the names of the Almighty One—he who embodies eternal happiness—and seeking shelter at his lotus feet, he set out to roam the world to sing his praise.

It is difficult to explain the great peace and joy that came over Shiva Prasad, who did nothing but speak of God, under whose feet he had found refuge—the one whom he had installed in his heart and to whose mercy creation owed all its limitless splendour and riches.

*Epilogue*

Our wish is not to bring the story to a close with the sad plight of Nityananda and Ushabati. But, for those eager to learn the couple's fate, here it is. Shortly after Shiva Prasad vanished, Ushabati died. Nityananda sold off his property and, keeping only what he needed to survive, donated the rest to the temple of Sri Jagannath, in Puri. He moved to Puri, but he was not destined to live there long: he soon left for the divine abode.



## *They Too Are Human*

Sushila Devi

Translated by Sachidananda Mohanty

**T**he canal that flowed through Mirzapur divided the village into two equal halves. On one side lay the Hindu settlement, and, on the other, the Muslim. Perched on the canal bridge, two boys of eleven or twelve were engaged in animated conversation. One was Sayed Hameed Reja and the other, Shankar. Reja was the only son of the *sardar*, the headman of the Muslim settlement. And Shankar? He had lost his parents and was the darling of his widowed aunt.

Taking two guavas from his shirt pocket, Shankar said, "Here, Reja, have one. I stole it for you. Had nearly forgotten about it. Go on, eat it!"

Contented, Reja took a bite. "Come on," he said, "let's share." Reja looked around and stood up. After a while, the two friends parted.

Reja and Shankar had gone to the same school from their earliest childhood. Although they belonged to two different religious camps, none would dispute that they had one soul and body. Not a day could they live without seeing each other. If Shankar seemed to be ill, Reja would come running to the Hindu side of the village. Since he was not allowed to go inside Shankar's house, he would content himself with looking at Shankar through the back window.

Shankar was no different. He might take the mandatory bath after touching a Muslim, but Reja's slightest worry or discomfort made him run

to his friend's house. Children of two hostile camps, their souls were tied by a single thread of love. Their simple hearts could never harbour hatred.

It was getting dark. Just as Reja was leaving the house with a ripe papaya in hand, Sardar Mohammed Khan called out his name. Reja had never heard his father call him in such a solemn voice. Slowly, he came over and stood before his father. "Where are you off to?" asked the *sardar*.

"To meet Shankar."

The *sardar*'s face became grave. "To meet Shankar, I see!" he exclaimed. "Listen, my son, from today onwards you are not to visit with that Hindu boy. Understood? And if you insist, you will have to face the consequences. Be sure of that. Now get back home!"

Reja felt stunned. This was too sudden, too unexpected. His eyes filled with tears. As an only child, he had always enjoyed a special place in his father's heart. But why was he rebuked for no reason today? Why was he being told not to meet Shankar? What had he done wrong? Despite his efforts, he failed to find a reasonable answer. He looked at the papaya concealed inside his clothes and then threw it at the fence. The papaya dashed against the fence; its pieces lay scattered on the ground.

As he gazed at the pathetic sight, distracted, tears rolled down from Reja's eyes. He felt stifled. He was very much in the custody of his father these days. Once or twice, he had snuck away from the mosque but had had to return disappointed. The *sardar* was mad at him. Such a grown-up boy! It was shameful that he could not abide by the norms laid down by his community.

Reja noticed that the gatherings in his house gradually swelled in size, and he felt frightened. At times, he asked his father why he wasn't allowed to see Shankar. Some of his Muslim friends jeered at him. "You must be dumb!" they exclaimed. "Don't you get it? Those Hindu idol-worshippers need a lesson! The Muslim League has been insulted by the Congress Party. So why do you go on getting together with that Hindu brat—to make friends with the enemy?"

None of this made any sense to Reja. What, after all, did Shankar have to do with the League and the Congress? It was enough that he and Shankar could meet up, play, and steal fruit together. What did it have to do with the Hindu-Muslim question? Reja was confused.

The next day would be Durga Saptami. Everything was quiet—perhaps the lull before the storm. In a room in the *sardar*'s house, many people huddled together. Reja strained his ears. He was startled as he heard his cousin's voice: "We should set fire to the first house in the Hindu settlement."

"The first house!" thought Reja. "But isn't that Shankar's? Arson in the dead of night?" What a thought—Shankar would be burnt to death. A tremor of rage tore through his heart. No, he would never allow such a thing to happen. Never!

Durga Saptami finally arrived. Everyone was in a festive mood, but there was no smile on Shankar's face. Every year on this day, he used to steal a portion of the food offering made to the goddess. Reja would sit waiting patiently on the bridge. He relished the taste of the delicious offering. But such times were nearly over.

Shankar felt a sense of disquiet. "Why don't you go and take part in the celebration?" his aunt urged. "Why do you sit still at home?"

"Not now. I'll go later," said Shankar, as he lay listlessly on the bed.

The night came on. The bustle of the day gradually subsided. There was an ominous silence all around. Like ghosts, a group of assailants moved swiftly and silently toward the bridge, armed with wooden clubs, torches, and knives. Reja, who had just dozed off, woke with a start. He sensed that the mob was in an aggressive mood and was scared to death. What would happen to Shankar and his hut? He could not bear to think about it.

Reja sprang up and ran breathlessly toward the bridge. By now, everyone in the Hindu settlement had been alerted. With whatever they could lay their hands on, they rushed toward their side of the bridge. Amid the commotion, Shankar heard their menacing cry that today they would bury the son of the *sardar* and settle their score.

The silence of the night was shattered. On each side of the bridge, a mob gathered, hurling a volley of slogans. "Jai Hind!" "Pakistan Zindabad!" Some of the Hindus had smashed parts of the bridge, but this did not deter their rivals from advancing. Amid the turmoil, a cry could be heard: "Shankar, my brother! Shankar!" It was Reja, the *sardar*'s son.

In the faint glow of a torch, Shankar stood in the front of the mob and faced Reja. Two young Hindu men emerged from the crowd wielding clubs. Were they going to kill Reja?

“Reja, Reja, step back!” urged Shankar in a fearful voice. The mobs stood face to face. Heedlessly, the two friends approached each other. The crowd became still. Two cries were heard: “Reja!” “Shankar!” Two palms came together, and then a deep splash echoed through the village as two bodies fell into the dark waters.

It seemed like a heavenly union. The souls of the two boys were united forever. The tender flower buds floated inexorably into the mouth of the mighty flood.

“Shankar, Shankar, my beloved, where are you?”

The plaintive cry of the Hindu widow shook the very bowels of the earth. Grieving uncontrollably, the old woman collapsed on the ground where Shankar and Reja had stood. “You murderers!” she wept. “You’ve killed my Shankar—my darling!”

A few burly youths ran toward the *sardar*. “Shall we finish off the old hag?” they yelled, their clubs raised to strike.

“No!” came the firm reply. “Go back to the village!” Strange. There were tears in the *sardar*’s eyes. His precious Reja was no more. The mobs eyed each other and slowly retraced their footsteps. The *sardar* stood alone. His gaze fell longingly on the swirling waters beneath his feet. He averted his eyes and turned back toward the village.



## *The Vigil*

Suprabha Kar

Translated by Arundhati Patnaik  
and Priyadarshi Patnaik

She is a fallen woman. But, to one who knew, a look at her face would banish all revulsion. So sad, so full of pain are her eyes, shining like stars in the dark! Even before the birds stir in the morning, one can see her walking away from Kashi's Manikarnika Ghat after her bath in the holy river Ganges, moving slowly, with small, dainty steps. Only the morning silently witnesses her motions. After her brief bath, she enters the Bisweswar temple, offers flowers to the image of Lord Bisweswar, and quietly communicates the agonies of her heart. The old priest of the temple often watches this devout woman with admiration. When, after offering her prayer, she sheds tears at the feet of the Lord, the old man's eyes, too, do not stay dry for long.

One day, even the image of the god, made of stone, seemed to shake a little on watching her pained face. The priest placed his hand on her head and asked, "Who are you, my daughter? You come every day and offer worship. So intense is your devotion that today the stone image of the god seemed to tremble! I have often wept at those feet but have never seen such expression on that face."

Cringing at his touch, Malati asked, "Does he listen to my prayers? Then why do I suffer so much?"

"He listens to you, my daughter! He listens to everyone's prayers."

"With that belief, I come every day and weep before him—that he might forgive all my misdeeds, remove all my sorrows and pull me unto his lap."

"What's your trouble? What misdeeds have you committed?"

What is her trouble—what sins has she committed? How will she express her agonies, and to whom? At the priest's repeated questions, Malati raised her eyes to his face and replied, "Oh, Brahmin, you will not understand. I have many sorrows. There's no end to my misdeeds. I am not even worthy to come to this holy temple."

Surprised, the old man asked, "Why, who are you?"

Slowly, she replied, "I am a fallen woman." On hearing these words, the Brahmin would not have been more startled had there been a sudden bolt of lightning.

"Sinful woman! With what audacity have you come here? To make this temple impure? Go away at once."

Heeding this command, Malati, the culprit, withdrew but kept looking back beseechingly at the Brahmin. Her anguished expression stirred a memory in the old man. With a choked voice he asked, "Why did you come here?"

With that touch of compassion, Malati's tears overflowed. In a broken voice and with tears in her eyes, she said, "Why? I have always asked myself the same question—why was I born? I have never had any affection since childhood. After four daughters, when I was born, my mother cried in despair; Father turned his face away. This is how I was received when I was born. As I grew older, I would die of shame on seeing my elder sisters. I was so dark! I understood why my father worried for me.

"Yet, when I came of age, several proposals for marriage came for me—because my father had promised a dowry of four thousand rupees. Was it easy to get so much money? Many worthy young men of our place were willing to marry me. One night, one such man arrived in the company of a procession and married me. Wedded to that stranger, I started out for his house. On the day of my departure, my mother pulled me to her when no one was nearby and cried uncontrollably. A mother's heart—perhaps she guessed something of my future.

“The first few days in my new home passed happily. But as the memory of the four thousand rupees faded, my husband’s fondness for me declined. He became a drunkard. ‘The daughter-in-law is inauspicious. The moment she came, she made my son wayward.’ My mother-in-law could never reconcile herself to this misfortune. My husband’s atrocities increased with every passing day. To this, my mother-in-law would keep adding fuel.

“Many nights, I lay unconscious because of the beatings I got. No one even came to say a word of comfort. I used to forget all my sorrows on just seeing one face—my son’s. My one and only precious jewel. But he also cheated me and went away! How could it be otherwise? One has to experience all the sorrows that one is destined for. After suffering from fever for three days, without any treatment, my son died. Before taking his last breath, he stretched his tiny feverish hands toward me and called, ‘Mother, Mother!’

“I couldn’t endure it anymore. A river flowed by our house. I thought I would renounce all my suffering in its cold bosom and drown myself. I went and stood near the river and was about to take the plunge, but a gentleman brought me back. He assured me that he would give me a job at his house. I forgot everything. No harm in serving in someone’s home. At least I would be free from my husband’s daily tortures! I had no wish to go back to that house from where the cry ‘Mother!’ had disappeared forever.

“With one last tearful glance at that home of several years, I set out with him. And then the bubble burst—I woke up to realize that I had lost everything. Every door in the wide world was forever shut to me. Society, without any reflection on my sin, closed all roads and left me with only one option. On seeing that path, my entire being trembled with repulsion. Carrying the burden of all sins, I came away from there—society conferred on me, with great kindness, the title—a fallen woman! But the man, who took advantage of my pitiable condition and built this reputation for me, is an esteemed gentleman in the eyes of society.

“Do you know, O Brahmin, with what profound futility a deep anger grew in my heart against God? What rebellion stirred in my heart against the Lord? I decided to ruin myself and open the eyes of society to the truth! I took a vow that I would go to the gates of hell and say, ‘Look, O world. See what great ruin you have brought to the innocent by not doing her

justice?' But I couldn't do it. The holy memory of my eighteen-month-old son, his last cry at the time of his death, pulled me back from the path of hell. I can still feel the touch of that pure innocent flower when my heart turns toward evil.

"The blocked passages of my sorrows opened up, and they came pouring out in torrents of tears. In the darkness of my sorrows, I saw one faint ray of light. Following that faint glimmer, I arrived at this place. But even here, the world has no mercy to offer me a little space. To hide myself from the curious stares of scores of people, I creep here at night and set my eyes on the Lord—I acknowledge the unforgivable sin of that moment's weakness . . . O Brahmin! Is my sin so great that there is no reprieve? Are even the doors of this temple closed to me now?"

The old man's eyes brimmed with tears. He could not speak. He could only draw Malati to him with his thin frail hands and kiss her on the forehead. After such a long time, Malati found shelter in a calm and healing soul.



The more the old man was drawn, with care and compassion, to Malati, the greater was his anxiety. A fear dawned in his mind. Everyone was curious about Malati. Who was that maiden, whose soft smile brightened up the old man's house? Who was she who waited for his return, with his two-year-old grandson in her arms, the child whose comforting laugh made him forget the fatigue of a long day's work? When the old man was asked, he replied, "My daughter, who had been lost for many years, has come back home." The child looked happily at Malati and called her Mother. Waves of tenderness, long suppressed and hidden, would surge within her at his call, and she would hold the boy to her bosom and think of her lost child.

One day, the fear that sometimes tormented the old man became a reality. Malati's true identity was recognized, and if he did not drive her away from his home, he would lose his position as priest at the temple. "Dissolute old man—giving shelter to such a whore! We need a new priest. That fraud is unworthy of the Lord!"

The sky fell on Malati's head. "What? In this old age you have to endure such humiliation for giving me shelter? Drive me away. Let me go off to some distant place. I can bear any amount of humiliation, even hatred, but I can't tolerate your humiliation on account of me!" Tears streamed down her cheeks, each one of them striking the old man's heart.

Gently caressing her head, he said, "All right."

The young child pulled at Malati's sari and cried, "Mother!"

Malati was bound to the old man with ties of love—how could he let her go? The old man listened to everyone, smiled sadly, and said, "It's not possible, brothers. I can't abandon my child."

"Then leave this temple."

Looking tearfully at the deity, the old man said with a sigh, "Fine. If that satisfies you, why would I stand in the way? Today I'll leave this temple, but I cannot leave my daughter."

After the evening prayer, everyone left the temple. The old priest meditated before the deity and then bid him farewell forever. In the gathering dark, he looked back one last time. His feeble eyes filled with tears. To suppress the deep hurt within him, he smiled and strode back home. The house was waiting for the old man, who called, "Oh, my child!" No answer. Again he called, but no one came running. Fearfully, the old man went in and found the little boy asleep. By his side, a lamp—but what was that paper lying beside it?

The old man picked it up. It was a letter in Malati's hand: "I am leaving this world—I am a curse upon it. I not only suffer, I become the cause of unhappiness to the people who give me solace. Let your paternal heart bless me so that I achieve peace on the other side of life." The old man, carrying the sleeping child in his arms, rushed to the riverbank. He cast his frail eyes into the distance, far away, where the water was still—something bobbed up and down a few times and then disappeared into the endless water.

Since that day, every evening, along with the child, the old man has waited hopefully on the bank—who knows, his waiting might bring back the dead from the other side. The child asks, "Mother?" The old man draws him close and points his finger—to where the water meets the endless sky.



## *In Bondage*

Basanta Kumari Patnaik

Translated by Jatindra K. Nayak

“And then?”

“Then Sister-in-law brought me here. I came. Because nothing could have stopped me from coming. At first, I liked Sister-in-law very much. I did all the housework. I combed her hair. I did the washing. I did everything for her.

“Perhaps she, too, was very fond of me. Yes, she was, or else she would not have left the management of the entire household to me. I did everything.

“She did not belong to our religion. She was a Christian. And extremely beautiful. Maybe it was her looks that made me love her so much. Although I did not always remember my mother, thoughts of her often crossed my mind. She was in very poor health—I always worried about how she was getting on. But she was not used to writing letters. I wrote to her regularly but never received a reply.

“We have already spent a year in this huge city, Bombay. At first, I thought that although the city was vast, staying here would make me get used to it. But I don’t like it anymore. Maybe one likes a city for a time and then it loses its appeal. Now I often feel the pull of the old house with the dirty front yard and the *tulsi* plant on the altar in front of it. I feel sad and think of Mother. She died last month. She succumbed to her last illness.”

“What? You knew she was ill and yet you did not visit her even once?”

“I could have gone . . . but I didn’t . . . I had no idea her condition was so serious. Brother is away from home for most of the month, and the few days he does spend at home, he attends parties and goes to the club. Sister-in-law accompanies him to all these. I long to join them, at least once . . . Exciting things must happen at these parties. Why else would they go to them so often? But I have never been able to bring myself to ask them to take me.

“Sister-in-law does not know our language. She and I communicate through signs. And to get to see Brother or speak to him is next to impossible. Whenever he leaves for parties, he is in such a hurry that I don’t dare tell him anything. He and his wife go away and I am left behind, alone and uncared for.

“Then they come back, accompanied by friends who are complete strangers to me. I would like to talk to them, but I can’t speak their language. At first, I could not understand it at all, but gradually, I began to understand a little. It was my job to serve them tea and snacks.

“The first blow came when Sister-in-law introduced me to them as a housemaid. When she said this, Brother looked at her with a strange expression in his eyes. This led me to guess that she had said something nasty. And that it referred to me. Knowing this, and my shabby clothes, made me extremely reluctant to face their friends, but I did so all the same, even when no one asked me to.

“Very soon, I noticed that I was being completely cut off. Brother would not utter a word to me. The old woman who stayed with us resembled Sister-in-law, but Sister-in-law refused to recognize her as her mother. She would say she called her ‘mother’ and showed her respect because she had been reared by her. She would claim that her real parents lived in Britain. The fact was she balked at the thought of telling my brother that this woman was her mother. I never heard her say a kind word to her. I was not allowed to either. The old woman wept, and her sad eyes made me feel very depressed.

“As for Sister-in-law, she could not have cared less, for her friends kept her busy. And what of me? Day and night I remained occupied with household work. Whenever I had any free time, I spent it knitting woollen sweaters. I now have a pile of pullovers. What am I going to do



with these? However, I must admit that my kind brother and sister-in-law bring me wool and knitting needles. But I was once shut up for two days in a room and made to knit a pullover to be given to someone. I was let out only after that man left the hotel.

"This house is a hotel after all . . . all manner of people come here. I try to figure everyone out from a distance, to get under their skin. I feel the urge to approach them, to tell them many things and ask them all kinds of questions. If I could talk to them, all the words lying frozen in my head would melt away. But I could never meet them.

"I am never allowed a moment's respite. No matter what I am doing, Sister-in-law's eyes follow me everywhere. She is afraid that I may fall into conversation with someone. She warns me that girls lose their reputation if they talk to riffraff.

"If a human being is not allowed to exchange a word with another, will she remain human anymore? Yes, I do talk with my parents . . . in my dreams . . . but when I am awake, I talk to the stars, the clouds, and the moon.

"In time, I came to realize that Sister-in-law never really liked me. What I had mistaken for fondness was but a chain meant to keep me in bondage. And whatever she did to draw me to her and make me loyal was but a trap.

"One day, I chanced upon a packet containing two or three letters from Mother, all torn to pieces. Sister-in-law could not read our language. Since she had married Brother against Mother's wishes, she destroyed the letters, thinking that they might contain things against her. One day, I saw her burning a sheaf of papers in the kitchen. But she had not yet had a chance to destroy these two or three letters. Alas . . . what a terrible thing . . . and I always thought Mother never replied to my letters, that she had forgotten about me. Brother was so dear to her. It was only because of him that she had agreed to send me to such a far-off place.

"Mother must have filled her letters with many things: household problems, her illness, everything that happened before she died. But we never got to know anything about these things.

"I will go away . . . I have often thought I should return home . . . but return to whom? Who is there? To whom? Mother is no more. I know no one here . . . I have found you today. I want to run away with you. I

will go wherever you take me. I wouldn't mind if you took me as your maidservant. I can't go on living this life any longer. God has given me this opportunity. I feel as if the burden oppressing me is falling from my shoulders. Please take me with you."

"Me? Where will I take you? I don't have even a place to live. I leave for Britain by ship today. Where will I take you? Go home."

## *Ruins*

Gayatri Basu Mallik

Translated by Snehaprava Das

"No, my boy, one shouldn't catch the birds."

A woman's voice. It came from somewhere nearby.

"I have left my little one sitting alone on the canal bank. . . . No, don't catch the birds."

It was the same voice again. I looked around curiously. "The bus stops here only up to three o'clock? But that's too little time," I thought aloud.

"It won't leave before three o'clock, sir. Have some sweets. The sweetmeats in our shop are the best in this area. You are here to see the sun temple of Konark, I guess. Have you seen it before?" asked the man at the counter of the sweetmeat shop, who had heard me soliloquizing.

"Only once when I was a child," I replied. "I came with my parents, but I don't remember much. Studies have preoccupied most of my time. Now that my post-graduate examinations are over, I have found some leisure time to visit the place again after quite a long interval."

"No, my boy, don't you catch the birds." The woman spoke again.

My searching gaze wandered after the voice that kept on repeating the strange sentence.

To the left of the shop was a thick growth of *kia* shrubs. A woman sat beside it. Lying nearby was a bundle of rags and a metal plate with its enamel coating peeled off in several places. A thick mop of rough, wiry

hair, dishevelled by the wind, capped her head. There was a vacant, far-away look in her sunken, mad eyes.

"Babu, where are you from?" the shopkeeper asked. I turned to look at him.

"Cuttack," I answered shortly.

"Don't you catch the birds, my boy."

Again I turned my face to the ugly, mad woman. Why do my eyes keep returning to that repulsive creature, I asked myself. The way she kept on repeating the peculiar sentence disturbed me. I was no longer able to suppress my curiosity. I looked at the shopkeeper.

"What is it that the madwoman keeps on saying—'Don't you catch the birds' and 'My son is left sitting on the canal bank.' What does it mean?" I asked him.

A dark shadow of sorrow crossed his face as he answered. "It is quite sad a story, sir, and a long one too. Would you like to hear it? But there won't be much time left for seeing the temple after that." Curiosity gripped me even more strongly.

"I shall find myself a free Sunday sometime later for another visit. I want to know. Tell me about her—of course, if it does not trouble you."

"Why should it trouble me? But it would be a waste of time for you. You will have to return without seeing the temple.

"She is Champa," the shopkeeper began. "Her husband, Magunia, worked somewhere in Calcutta. They had very little land of their own. Champa and their three sons lived on the money her husband sent to her. But Magunia had made his wife promise not to step out of their home to work as long as he lived—"

"Where did she live?"

"Not far away from this place, a village called Kunei. That's where they lived."

"Wouldn't you give me two of those sweets?" Someone spoke behind me. I turned around. It was the madwoman. She stood there in front of the shop stretching out a pathetic hand.

The shopkeeper lifted a small stick and waved it at her threateningly, "Go away or else!"

"It's all right. Don't give if you don't want to. I must hurry. I have left my little one sitting on the bank of the canal." She clutched the bundle of

rags under her sleeve and shifted the flaking enamel plate from her right hand to her left, in which she already held a small stick. Clutching both things together in her left hand, she walked away.

"No, my boy, one shouldn't catch birds," the woman kept on muttering those words and scratched hard at her head with the long fingernails of her right hand as she moved on.

Lice perhaps, I thought. I bought two sweets from the shop and half ran, half walked to reach her. "Here, take these," I said, holding them out. She fixed her expressionless, sunken eyes on my face for a moment, grabbed the sweets and disappeared around the corner. I stood there for a while looking after her and then returned to the shop.

"What then?" I asked the man.

"Magunia wrote letters to her. And she used to get them read by every literate person in the village. It was as if she was not satisfied with listening to the contents just once. She wanted to hear them again and again.

"It was Nabaghana, Magunia's cousin who also worked in Calcutta, who brought the news of his death. Magunia, he said, had suffered from some deadly fever for several days before finally succumbing to it. Champa shed not a single tear. Her reflexes seemed to have been paralyzed. She sat like a wooden statue, her eyes empty. She remained like that for two days. Late on the third night, she broke into a loud wailing. It was a heart-rending sound, and there seemed to be no stopping it.

"Days went by. Champa had to come out of her seclusion and seek a livelihood. She did odd jobs of domestic help in the houses of some moneyed people in the village. She used to get up quite early in the morning and go from one house to another. She earned just enough to feed her family of four. Mourning the death of her husband in the dead of the night had become a part of her routine.

"Malati, her elder sister, came to visit, with her two daughters. She brought betel leaves, areca nuts, tobacco powder, and new clothes for the children.

"I can see how difficult it is for you to run the household all alone,' Malati said to her sister as she prepared to return home after a few days' stay. 'If you agree, I can adopt one of your sons. The second one, maybe. What do you say?'

“Champa stared at her sister for a long while. ‘Now I know why you came here,’ she finally replied, in a tone of contempt. She pulled her three sons to herself and held them close. ‘I don’t have a son to give you,’ she declared. ‘Their father is watching me from heaven. What would he say? He would think that Champa was so selfish that she started giving away his sons as soon as he left. Wouldn’t he? I can’t do that.’ Malati returned home with a heavy heart.

“After Magunia died, his younger brother, Haria, and his wife, Lavani, implored the widowed Champa to come and live with them. The two brothers had separated soon after Haria’s marriage. When Haria and his wife claimed a larger share of the family’s land and all the household goods, Champa had quarrelled with them. But Magunia had pulled her aside and tried to mollify her. ‘I’ll get you everything you want,’ he said soothingly. ‘Please do not make a scene. Let them take what they like.’

“Champa had obeyed her husband, but the cold hostility did not die. Years followed one another. Lavani could not provide Haria with an heir, even after many years of marriage, and the curse of being childless killed all the happiness in their lives. Champa lived with them until the funeral rites for her husband were over. Haria pleaded earnestly with Champa, trying to stop his widowed sister-in-law from living alone. ‘Sister-in-law, please don’t go. We can knock down the wall in the middle of the house and stay together. We are family, after all,’ he said solicitously. ‘I don’t have a child of my own to make a claim on my property. Your three boys are ours, too.’

“But Champa hadn’t forgotten. Nor had she forgiven her brother-in-law and his wife for their adamant and unjust claims. ‘I wouldn’t do that,’ she replied defiantly. ‘This is your property, and you can throw it to the wolves or let it go down the gutter, for all I care. But people would think that I had come to live on your earnings after misfortune befell me, and I wouldn’t be able to put up with such comments. I would rather work as a daily labourer and rear up my children on my own.’

“Lavani, too, begged Champa to forget the past and come to live with them. ‘Enough of your honeyed words,’ Champa snapped at her sister-in-law. The aggrieved couple finally gave up.

“Champa strove to start life afresh. She worked in the houses of Anam Das and the Pattnaik family, in the neighbouring village. Anam Das, the

old Brahmin, had his greedy eyes on the land on which Champa's house stood. Feigning concern in an effort to hide his true motive, the old man tried to persuade the widowed mother to come and live on the premises of his home: 'We have a large servants' quarter—why don't you move in here with your sons? That would save you the long walk. What do you think?'

"Champa glared at the old Brahmin. 'Don't you try to act smart,' she retorted. 'I know you have been eyeing this plot for a long time. You're eager to take what little land I have and make it part of your own threshing yard, no? But I will never let that happen as long as I am alive. Never try to deceive me with your cunning. You know me well—I can easily ignore all the proprieties of the master-servant relationship.'

"Das was a clever man. He immediately realized that he had touched the tail of a cobra. He tried to change his tactics. 'Look at the silly woman!' he said, in a voice full of amused affection. 'It seems you have totally misunderstood my intention. I was concerned because I thought it must be quite painful for you to walk that distance every day.'

"'Enough,' Champa jeered. 'Cut the act, and keep your kindness to yourself.'

"Haria, her brother-in-law, appealed to her again. 'Sister-in-law, I shall not compel you to live together with us if you do not like the idea. But won't you let me bring up one of your sons? The second son—let me adopt him. Would it be proper if I had to adopt an heir outside the family?'

"Champa glared at him. 'I don't care where you get one,' she said angrily. 'I would rather have my sons starve to death than live with you. How your brother wished that you would show a little gesture of affection to his children! Often he used to tell me, 'Haria has never even cared to say a word of love to my children, let alone give them anything.' How he longed to see you taking his sons in your arms! Now that he is no more, your heart floods with love for them, eh? I shall never let something that did not happen when he was alive happen after his death. Get away from here!' Champa dismissed the subject.

"Her youngest son was two years old, while the eldest one was nine, Champa calculated. It was winter at the time, and she arranged for her eldest son to stay in the home of Padhan, who lived in the village, until the end of the following autumn. The boy would take the family's cattle out to graze. She had sorted it out with Padhan. He would provide food

and clothing for the boy, as well as eight rupees a year as salary. The arrangement, Champa thought, could bring an end to their troubles.

“My elder brother’s wife was a good friend of Champa,” the shopkeeper said, “and the poor woman shared all her joys and sorrows with my sister-in-law. I heard Champa’s story from her.” He paused before resuming his tale.

“Padhan employed Sania, Champa’s eldest son, as the cowherd boy. A canal was newly dug at the end of the village. The canal was lined with tall trees of mango and *jamu* berry on both sides. Sania took the cows to the shrubby forest beyond the bank of the canal to graze. Mania, Champa’s second son, who found life dull without his elder brother, often accompanied him to the jungle. He ran after the cows, prattling happily and carrying a small stick in his tiny hand. Both the brothers played in the jungle until sundown and then returned to the village with the cows.

“Days went by and summer arrived. Fruit began to ripen in the trees. Birds laid eggs under the thickets. The brothers kept a close watch over the eggs, and as soon as a baby bird came out of the egg, they took it home. Despite all their care and vigilance, the little birds could not escape the cat’s lethal clutches. The birds disappeared in the morning. Only a torn leg of one or a few tender plumes of another lay here and there, as if to testify to their presence on the previous evening.

“Champa warned her sons not to indulge in such activities. ‘No, my boys, one shouldn’t catch the birds,’ she advised. ‘Why in the name of God are you playing with precious lives?’ The boys turned a deaf ear to their mother’s admonitions and returned home with another bunch of chicks the next evening. ‘No, my darlings, you should never catch the birds.’ Champa’s reprimands were heard again. And this went on day after day.

“It was noontime. Champa was sitting in the courtyard of her house by an earthen cauldron, boiling the five measures of rice that she had brought from the Pattnaik family. Her youngest son sat playing nearby. Then Gopia Pana, who cut canes from the jungle bordering the canal, came running into the yard. He tried to say something, but the running had left him gasping for breath and words just spluttered out of him. Champa stared at him in surprise, unable to make head or tail of what he was saying. It took Gopia a little time to get hold of himself.



“Come immediately with me,’ he urged Champa when he was able to speak clearly.

“Won’t you tell me what the problem is?’ Champa demanded.

“Your sons were catching birds in the undergrowth. I was busy cutting canes not far from them. Suddenly, the younger one let out a loud scream. I rushed to see what had happened. The older one was lying unconscious near the tree and the younger one was writhing in pain. Already, his body is beginning to turn blue. Don’t waste any time. Come now!’ Gopia ran out of the house.

“Champa was seized with terror. ‘Oh, my God!’” she cried, and, scooping the baby boy into her arms, ran blindly after him.

“It takes no time for news to spread in a small village like ours. Soon the people of the village gathered in the jungle. I was among them. We were just in time to see a cobra that looked like a long wire of gold slithering into the shrubs.

“Not wasting even a moment, Haria rode away on his bicycle to fetch the village doctor. He came back almost immediately, the doctor with him. Champa sat there silently caressing the heads of her sons. The two brothers, like Rama and Lakshman, lay unconscious on the forest floor. Their bodies were turning blue. The best efforts of the doctor to neutralize the effect of the poison were useless.

“Haria and his wife wailed and beat their chests. Champa had turned into stone. Not one tear escaped her eyes. After a long time, Lavani reached out her hand to Champa, motioning her to stand up. Champa got up obediently, without a word of protest.

“‘Why are you going with them? We should go straight to the cremation ground with the bodies,’ someone said to Haria. Sobbing loudly, Haria threw himself on the ground once more.

“Suddenly Lavani said, ‘Sister, where is your youngest son?’ Champa was startled out of her trance for a moment and turned her eyes toward the canal bank. ‘Do you hear me?’ Lavani shouted at her husband. ‘Find out where the youngest boy has gone!’

“We all stood there, stunned. The little boy was nowhere in sight. We rushed to the bank, leaving behind the two bodies in the jungle. We threw a net into the water and made a frantic search. The body was finally fished out of water some two kilometres up from the bank of the canal. It was too late by that time.

“Champa sat like a lifeless statue. Her eyes were dry. Nor did she utter a single word. She did not bathe or brush her teeth unless someone made her do it. She did not eat a morsel of food unless someone fed her. She remained like that for six long months, and then one day she abruptly spoke. The first sentence she said was, ‘No, you shouldn’t catch the birds, my boy.’ After an hour or so she said another: ‘I have left my son sitting on the canal bank.’ And thereafter she kept repeating those two sentences like a litany. She has been doing that for the past ten years.

“Haria and Lavani were looking after her, but she ran away from home. She bit and scratched them when they tried to stop her. She did not return for many years. Some people of her village claimed to have seen her in the vicinity. They had seen Champa, they said, sleeping under a tree or drinking gruel at someone’s doorstep.

“She came here some three years ago, and since then she has been roving aimlessly. She begs people for food. One might give her something to eat or turn her away, for all the reaction she shows. That greedy old Brahmin, Anam Das, God knows by what foul means, obtained Champa’s thumbprint on a notarized paper and declared his ownership of her plot of land. He succeeded in laying claim to her threshing yard.

“‘Champa sold me the plot,’ he insisted when Haria tried to protest.

“Haria did not fight the case in a court of law. ‘There is no heir in our family to whom the land could be bequeathed,’ he said sorrowfully. ‘Let that swindling Brahmin have it.’”

The shopkeeper stopped. “This is the story of Champa. Quite a moving one, isn’t it, sir?” He looked at me. I looked at my watch. It was still twenty minutes to three. I looked around, but Champa was nowhere in sight. I let out a deep breath. Suddenly, my eyes returned to the thick *kia* shrub near the sweets shop, and there she lay, asleep. I was surprised. She had reached the bush behind the shop so silently that I had not had the slightest inkling of her return. A shadow of gloom swept over me, leaving me restless and profoundly disturbed. Had she been able to cry her heart out, she might not have lost her mental balance, I thought sadly. But perhaps her madness was a blessing in disguise, I decided on second thought. It would have been an unbearable ordeal to face the enormity of her loss with a mind that was still clear.

Quickly, I went into a nearby hotel and purchased a meal of rice, dal, and fish curry. Carrying the food, I went to the place where she slept.

“Champa,” I called. She opened her eyes and looked at me. I showed her the food and pointed at her plate. She held out the plate obediently, her gaze still fixed on my face. I placed the food items neatly on her plate. Not waiting for even a moment, Champa began eating. She gobbled up the food as if she had been hungry for years.

“She hasn’t eaten with such relish for years, sir,” the shopkeeper said. A mood of deep melancholy gripped me as I watched her eating like that.

Little time was left before the bus would leave. At the sound of the horn, I turned and walked toward it. Before entering the bus, I turned and glanced back at Champa. She sat still near the sweets shop, leaning against a post.

I had begun my journey to Konark in a cheerful mood, looking forward to witnessing a testament to architectural genius. I had come here to see beautiful dreams carved in stone, an artistic phenomenon that twelve hundred sculptors had given a lifetime of effort to create. In the end, I hadn’t had time to look at it closely—although, even from a distance, I could see the remains of the aura of grandeur the temple had once worn. It stood like a mute witness to a glorious legend.

But I did have a very, very close view of the image of a pathetic creature that the mysterious Creator had sculpted with his own hands. I heard the heart-wrenching story of that poor creature. Champa might not be mute, like the temple of Konark, but the fathomless agony underlying the few sentences she uttered had the power to strike me dumb. Instead of witnessing the grand ruins of a stone structure, I saw the ruins of real flesh and blood. All the way back, I kept asking myself whether I should regret that or not.



## *Pata Dei*

Binapani Mohanty

Translated by Ashok K. Mohanty

**N**obody had seen Pata Dei since that fateful night of the Dola festival. It seemed as though the night itself had engulfed her. That night, the moonlight was spread clear and bright all over the village. After the ritual journey from house to house, the deities were being gathered in the field. The air was thick with the swelling crowds, the sounds of cymbals and bells, and the children smearing colours on one another. The excitement of the full moon night is very different from what follows the next day—the Holi celebrations. This night comes once a year, only to disappear before one realizes it was there. But the experience settles down like dust, like the colours, unnoticed by all. It clings to the body and mind the whole year long—piling up inside. Perhaps that is how, behind Pata’s pleasant smile, worries accumulated like layers of cloud.

On that moonlit night, Pata came back home from the fair after offering food to the deities. She even ate a bowlful of water-soaked rice with some fried drumstick leaves. And later, on the kitchen veranda, she rested on a mat, complaining of uneasiness in her stomach. Her father had left early that morning, carrying the deities on his shoulder to some faraway village. And there was not a soul at home she could talk to.

Mani Bhauja, the woman next door, came by with some others, asking her to play cards. But she refused to go because of her uneasy stomach.

They went away, closing the door behind them, laughing among themselves. Someone even commented, "She is simply lazing around without a care in the world. The stomach pain is just an excuse, believe me." But Pata had no time for anything that day except her silent wandering thoughts. The bustle in the neighbourhood left her untouched. She did not want to be part of it.

People say that Pata left in the depth of that night without any fear of the jackals, dogs, and wolves, the lurking ghosts and witches. She left the village that was swaying with the rhythm of devotional songs, cymbals, drums, and the voices of the excited crowd. She locked the house and went to watch the celebration. Nobody came to open the latched door or worry about where she had gone.

The night-long festivities, the unfettered abandon of the following morning, and the play of colours left the village drained. People retired under their low roofs, catching up on lost sleep. No one had either time or energy to worry about others—who was where, whether anyone was starving, alive, or even dead. That night, again, there was the much-awaited mock fight between groups in the village. In this tide of excitement, nobody noticed the disappearance of Pata until Jaggu Behera, her father, came back tired and hungry the next afternoon. His anger knew no bounds when he saw the locked door. He called out for Pata, loud enough for the neighbours to hear, but got no response. He rested for a while and then went around calling out for her at the top of his voice.

How could he not go wild? He had sold off the little land he had to get her married. The son-in-law was as handsome as a prince, with a house and lands. There was also a lot of pawned gold in the family. But the girl had refused to stay there for even a couple of months. God knows what went amiss. She was a pampered child, he thought. Maybe she could not adapt herself to her in-laws. Poor girl, she did not even have her mother or a sister to confide in. And he was in no position to command authority over her in-laws. In the midst of all his work, he kept worrying about Pata . . . constantly.

It had been drizzling slightly the night that Pata had left her in-laws to come back to her father. A thick sheet of ominous ink-black cloud rolled across the sky. The frogs were croaking at the edge of the pond. Jaggu was fast asleep, covered with a sheet from head to toe, when the latch of

the front door rattled. Dismissing it as the work of some evil spirit, Jaggu had fallen asleep again when the latch rattled a second time. Irritated, he got up, took the sacred stick kept near the gods for protection from evil spirits, and opened the door. He was shocked to find Pata standing there. In amazement, he asked, "How is it that you are here?" She avoided the question and walked in, closing the latch behind her.

Jaggu was worried. "Why have you come in the middle of the night? Did you have a fight with my son-in-law?" Pata stood silently, leaning against the wall, her head bowed. He asked again, almost pleadingly. "Why don't you speak up, girl? Did the old couple ill-treat you? Are you all right?"

Pata walked into the house without replying. Whatever the problem was, Jaggu thought, he would come to know about it in time. Why should he trouble her unnecessarily in the middle of the night? God knows whether she had eaten anything or not. She had always been a moody child. Seeing her sitting on the kitchen veranda, he said, "Will you eat something? There must be some rice in the pot."

Pata placed her head on her knees and started crying inconsolably. She had never before cried like this, not even on the day she got married and left home. Wiping his daughter's tears with the cotton towel hanging around his neck, he understood that his daughter was unable to stay with her in-laws any longer. He sighed. Maybe she is too young to bond in marriage, he thought. She will learn by and by. But when her husband or father-in-law comes to fetch her in the morning, he will certainly demand an explanation.

But that never happened. Nobody ever came to fetch her. Whenever he asked, she would stare at him with tear-filled, helpless eyes. For some reason, he could never find the courage to go over to her in-laws and try to sort things out. They both managed to carry on somehow, with whatever he earned from long days of back-breaking labour. Pata never tried to explain herself. At times, he thought she was stubborn, but he was in no position to complain. There was always the lurking fear of losing Pata.

People in the neighbourhood started gossiping after she returned to her father. Some said she had been thrown out after a fight with her in-laws. Some said she had to be thrown out because of her loose character. Embarrassed, Jaggu wanted to ask her the truth. He even felt the impulse to take

her back and leave her with her in-laws. But her fearful, helpless stare prevented him from doing or saying anything. He would leave for work at the crack of dawn, return at dusk, and fervently pray for a solution. After all, he would not live forever to take care of her.



Two days of fatigue and hunger were making Jaggu feel faint. His daughter should have been at home, waiting with something ready to eat. But no! She was away, probably laughing, playing cards, like other young girls. He would have to slog on alone until he was dead and ready to be carried away to the graveyard. Nobody will ever come forward to look after me, he thought angrily. He went around the village calling for her again. But he returned disappointed. Dusk was approaching fast. The shadows had begun to lengthen toward the half-lit backyards. Sitting on the veranda, Jaggu dozed off against the wall. At dawn, he woke to the call of birds and found the latch still locked, as it had been the night before.

People say he never stopped dozing after that. He sat there, barely aware of his surroundings. If anyone tried to talk to him, he only stared blankly. If any girl offered him food, big tears rolled down his cheek and he said nothing. The story goes that he became deaf and dumb, unable to tolerate the strange, scandalous ways of his daughter—that he breathed his last sitting there, staring at the latch, with swarms of flies buzzing around his stone-dead face.



Three years have gone by since Pata left home. Three years also since Jaggu Behera departed from this world. Thrice, the festival of Dola has come and gone. Thrice, the tiny raw mangoes have ripened and fallen. The tides of the river have swept the banks and flowed into the sea. Mani



Bhauja has become a widow with an infant playing on her lap. Pata's friends, too, have gone their own ways, swept away by the course of their destiny. But nobody has seen or heard of Pata. All these years, nobody has given a thought to where she went, what happened to her. The sun, however, has risen every morning, the seasons have come and gone as usual, and Pata's disappearance has remained a mystery in everyone's mind—unasked, untold . . . unwanted, too.

The door of the house remained locked exactly as it was when Jaggu Behera breathed his last there. The torn mats, the bed sheets, and the few things lying around remained untouched. Nobody wanted to lay their hands on the cursed, unfortunate, unclaimed objects. After all, people were afraid of ghosts and spirits. The house was at the far end of the village, and the tree outside the house had stopped flowering long ago. There was no need for anyone to go near the house. Occasionally, people going by saw visions of Pata clad in white or heard the gruff calls of her father. It became a haunted house.

But one fine morning, there was excitement everywhere. The past three years seemed like ages now. It was difficult to remember bygone events. People who knew nothing started fabricating facts. People who knew started despairing . . . helplessly. And all this because that morning, Pata was seen sweeping outside of her house. There was a two-year-old child, too, sucking his fingers, following her around. Pata had fattened a little around her waist and in her cheeks. But her eyes remained the same—tear-filled, helpless, and bleak. The news spread like wildfire.

"Pata, the daughter of Jaggu, has come back with a child. Must be her own. Why else should she have the child around? Shameless, sinful woman. She abandoned a handsome, gentle husband. Couldn't stay on with her father either. Had to run away with someone in the middle of the night. Who would look after such a woman all his life? After all, she is no longer young and tender. Now, with nowhere else to go, she has returned to her father's old house."

Pata had changed. She had become indifferent, apathetic. If an elderly person asked her anything, she turned aside and stood silent, covering her head with her sari. If women tried to talk to her or joke around, she just stared—the fearful, helpless, bleak stare. Sometimes, she laughed to herself or sketched on the mud floor aimlessly.

Everybody said, "She is a fallen, loose woman. Has anybody heard of any woman proudly displaying her motherhood after abandoning her husband and in-laws? Oh Lord! This is just not done. Is she a goddess from heaven to do whatever she wants and still live respectably? How shameless! Couldn't she find some poison for herself?"

Pata's Class 3 education could not rescue her from her present crisis. She had no one to call her own who would protect her, fight for her. She had no guardian, either, to help her in difficult times or fight for her. The village elders finally made a decision. "She has to leave the village if she wants to live or else she will be burnt alive, along with Jaggu Behera's house. She is a slur on the whole village. She has smeared every woman's face black."

That evening, all the villagers gathered outside her door to seek an explanation. Tightly clutching the loose end of her half-torn sari, she decided to face them all . . . boldly.

"Yes! Yes! I gave birth to this child. When my husband left me and went away to Calcutta the day after my marriage, my mother-in-law and my father-in-law starved me inside a locked room. Somehow I managed to escape from there. All the while I stayed with my father, I received only abuse from everyone. My father had to suffer endlessly in his old age to keep himself and me alive. But he could neither fill our bellies nor reduce our shame."

Pulling the sari over her head resolutely, she went on. "I had no say in anything. I had nothing to say either. I couldn't even die to save my poor father from bone-breaking labour. The cruel earth thrust this child on me and sent me back."

One of the older members jumped up at her statement. Aggressively, he demanded, "Say that again—what did you say? The earth gave you the child indeed. You really have a way of putting things. Speak up now! Whose is this child?"

Pata pulled the sari covering her head even tighter. With a stammer, she slumped down, trembling all over. The child, clinging to her, had long ago stopped wailing. There was only an occasional hiccup coming from him. Someone kicked her hard—Mani Bhauja's mother-in-law, a distant aunt of Pata's—and screamed, "Aye! Do you have a frog in your mouth? Speak up. You could not stay even for a month with your in-laws. You

ate up your father alive. And now you say the earth has given you this child? Speak the truth. Who is the father of this child? Otherwise, I myself will cut you to pieces before the day is over. Don't you know my anger?"

The old woman put her foot on Pata's neck. All around her, amused men and women were looking on. Pata was gasping for breath. Sparks were flying from her eyes. No! She could not tolerate this any longer. The earth wouldn't split up to shelter her, nor would Hara Parvati come down from heaven to protect her from shame. She would have to stand up for herself. She had to take control of her life now. Suddenly, she felt a surge of strength. She shook off the leg from her neck and stood up straight—a strong mature woman, five feet tall. On her face, a strange purple hue was spreading—a frothy mixture of strength, anger, and hatred. After a searching stare at the crowd, she pulled the wailing child onto her lap.

"You want to know who the father of this child is?" There, they are all standing here. Ramu, Veera, Gopi, Naria, and a couple more. How can I tell whose child this is? That night, during the Dola festival when the mock fight was going on, these men stuffed a cloth in my mouth and carried me away to the edge of the graveyard. There, behind the bushes, they chewed me up alive . . . like plucking flesh from bones. My mouth was closed, but before losing my senses, I recognized them all by the moonlight.

"How can I tell whose child this is? Ask that Hari Bauri. He took money from all of them to leave me at Cuttack. All this time, I didn't come back because I didn't want to bring more shame on my father. Since returning, I've revealed nothing. But ask them all now. Let them swear on themselves and decide who the father of this child is."

Suddenly, there was confusion everywhere. The elders were left looking at one another. The youngsters were trying to suppress their giggles. But no one had anything to say. Mani Bhauja's mother-in-law had slumped down, tired and speechless, on the veranda. Ramu, Veera, Gopi, and Maguni were standing with their heads hanging down, waiting uneasily, ready to disappear as soon as possible.

Pata Dei wiped away her tears and started sweeping the veranda of her house again. A while later, she flung aside the broom, wiped the nose of the child and lifted him up, saying, "Why should you cry, dear? Don't be afraid of these people. None of them is man enough to stand up and

admit to being your father. But your mother is always there for you. You don't have to worry."

God knows what the child understood. He started laughing, pointing at the moon emerging from behind the clouds. The gathering had started to disperse—heads bowed, in a confused hushed silence. The tree outside the house had started flowering again. Mani Bhauja's mother-in-law, too, was disappearing with her walking stick.

Pata Dei looked around anxiously and spat a huge blob of spit on her child's chest to ward off the evil eye. "Oh God! My prince of a son has shrivelled under the gaze of these people. Why do I need to bother? On my father's piece of land, I'm the master. I'm the queen; my son is the prince."

For a moment the earth stopped moving under the blue expanse above. Pata Dei was looking up and down, laughing and crying at the same time.

## *A Timeless Image*

Banaja Devi

Translated by Ashok K. Mohanty

**T**here were times when I ran up against that image. Not when I was crossing the street, or in the restaurant of a cinema hall, or even in the crowd at the railway station. Not when I was wandering around all by myself, preoccupied, on a lonely bank of the river. Sometimes I ran up against it on untrodden paths, in the recesses of my mind.

My mind is like a satchel hanging from the shoulder of an itinerant traveller. I have lost track of the stuff that I have dumped into it over the years. I have picked up things as I've travelled the winding roads—a lot of thorns, a few flowers, some handfuls of dust. I have even lovingly taken a few ashes from the funeral pyre into my palms. Laughter, wailing, and regrets—the pieces of the game of shadow and light that goes by the name of human existence—are all tucked away in that satchel. Sometimes, when I am fatigued or depressed, my mind takes them out and stares at them. At such times, a certain image may fall out. A timeless image.

The image could be from some ramshackle, unknown temple in an obscure village. Over the years, I have been in thrall to that image and have silently tolerated its presence. What else could I do? Nor is the weight of this one small image inconsiderable. Do I have the strength to measure its size?

Yet I have not been able to throw the image away. I have tried to ignore it at times, but I haven't been able to turn a blind eye to it altogether. I have been secretly playing a game of hide and seek with it—the image that I picked up one day and held so dear. Did I ever imagine, back then, that—out of sheer neglect on my part, for days on end—it would become so aggressive as to hover my head and upbraid me for my inadequacies?

The soaking wet evening in the month of Shravana had dried up, and the Bhubaneswar railway platform was bustling with activity. The warm calls of the tea vendor, the shrieks of the newspaper hawker excitedly announcing the headlines, and the pandemonium created by the passengers had made the evening come alive. I was standing on the platform, waiting for the Puri-Howrah Express. My brother was arriving from the Andamans via Kolkata on that train. I had come to meet him. But whenever I wait for a train, it invariably arrives late. I have therefore developed a great deal of patience when it comes to waiting for trains. In the grey haze of my patience, I took in the railway station, the trains, and the people surrounding me, focusing my attention on them.

I had waited for trains all my life and, in the process, had perhaps recognized the truth that, at any given moment, a railway station reflected life's little joys and sorrows. I cast another affectionate glance around the platform. I watched people around me running here and there. Each was different from the others, each one a prisoner within the circumference of his or her own thoughts. Life has become so hasty! Everyone seemed to be in a hurry.

It is as though people of this age are meant to do nothing but run. One has to run, before the time is up. The hawkers competed fiercely among themselves to sell their wares and, in the process, did not mind getting into a scuffle. The blind beggar continued to beg amid all of this, stumbling over two men sleeping on a piece of cloth spread out on the floor. The people clambering in and out of trains were in a hurry to push ahead of the crowd, with their baggage, wives, and children in tow. What a lot of things and company were needed just to travel from one place to another! Each man had to hold on firmly to the hands of his children and the corner of his wife's sari, never knowing when they might get separated in the crowd. Yet, when the train of death arrived, without whistle or signal, there would be no time to gather one's things together. One would not

be conscious of the moment when, in a flash, the train arrived to pick one up. What would become of all one's manoeuvring abilities at that time? But why am I thinking along these lines? Perhaps I've been waiting for that train of death, without even being aware of it. Could that be why I have grown sentimental about it?

As I was thus immersed in my thoughts, my eyes caught sight of something. What was this? Such a sculpture—inside a railway station? Although my eyesight was fairly weak, I had recently gotten a new pair of glasses, and what I was seeing seemed crystal clear: a sculpture made of black granite. But why put a sculpture like this in a railway station?

Then again, I reflected, mine was a land of crafts and sculptures. No one had bothered to keep count of the numerous beautiful images drawn on temples and palanquins, on floors, walls, and doors in unknown villages in my state. Who cared about them? The hunger of the stomach, the struggles of life, the terrible spectre of unsteady feet had taken their toll on the craftsmanship of artists. Now our government tries to beautify the city by putting artwork in public spaces. Perhaps this sculpture had been placed here to serve this purpose, as well as to display the skills of Odia artists to visitors.

Mercury light illuminated the platform. Everything seemed to glow. I took two steps forward in order to look at the image more closely. Yes, a black granite sculpture. An old man stood holding a staff. His eyes had sunk into their sockets and his stomach into the skeleton that passed for his frame. Behind him was a woman. In her arms was an emaciated baby, struggling to suck from her shrunken, half-covered breast. Evidently, the sculpture represented famine and hunger. Why this exhibition of poverty, though, in the name of art, for travellers from other states and foreign countries?

All of a sudden, a sweet fragrance spread through the air. I saw an overweight woman slumping onto a bench not far from me. Opulence was written all over her. She wore a pair of spectacles with rolled gold frames. A coolie was busy putting her baggage in order. Bedroll, suitcases, lunch basket, bottle of water, and so forth. I could tell from the way she wore her sari that she was a Marwari woman. Her husband was paying the coolie. The lady kept imploring her handsome son to eat something, making it seem that her sole concern was with him. My gaze naturally

shifted to the son. I saw that the boy, of about seventeen or eighteen, really was very attractive. He wore expensive clothes. But what was this? The boy's left leg was missing. Some accident maybe. Two crutches were beside him. How sad!

It is perhaps God's special artistry to leave insects in every beautiful flower.

A group of men suddenly barged onto the platform, shouting all kinds of slogans. They were all holding long wooden clubs. I edged closer to the Marwari lady, who was hugging her son to her chest. The men walked past us to a corner of the platform, hitting their sticks on the floor. They were shouting slogans such as "Give us work!" "Give us food for free!" "Blind government won't do!"

The Marwari gentleman came over to his wife and said, "Why are you scared? These people were here for a rally. Perhaps they're going home on this train."

In the meantime, the two men who had been asleep on the floor sat up. One of them, naked from the waist up, took a *paan* out of a small, dirty pouch and applied lime to it. "What else would we do," he sighed, "if we couldn't take part in political rallies? These days, we have no other way to make ends meet. There are no crops in the fields and no work available anywhere. We have to eat—so what are we supposed to do? One party calls on us today, and their opponents call on us the next day. We're always ready. We get something to eat for a couple of days, and we get some money. That's how we manage to keep body and soul together."

"Aintha Bhai, you've come here to attend rallies before, haven't you?" the man sitting beside him asked, waving away the mosquitoes. There was a huge hole in his vest, and the mosquitoes were biting him there.

The other put the pouch under his arm and chewed on the *paan*. "What else could I do?" he replied. "I came here last month, too. The leader said that he would pay ten rupees, besides the food. But, in the end, he gave me only five rupees. All the same, I managed for four days on the amount. The whole village was brought here in trucks to listen to the lecture of the minister from Delhi. One babu told us what to shout along the way, and we did exactly that. Then another babu gave us different instructions, and we carried them out, too. We don't need to know who the leaders are. All we want is to survive somehow."



I took a good look at the man. He was right. He had told the truth about how political rallies attract such crowds. He took out his purse and began to count the little change it held, but he stopped midway, staring straight ahead, his eyes transfixed. The Marwari lady had opened her lunch basket, which held five containers of food. She had laid everything out before her son and was begging him to eat something. Her love for her son was touching. She paid no attention to the crowd around her. The two village men were gazing at those open containers, without so much as blinking. Their eyes seemed to be saying, do people really get so many different things to eat?

The Marwari gentleman frowned. He looked at his wife and stood in front of the lunch basket to block their view.

At that point, my own eyes fell upon something. What was this? Earlier, I had seen something very clearly. But was I mistaken?

The black granite sculpture had been some distance away from me—but it had moved closer, as if on wheels. The woman carrying the baby was behind the old man, and there were two other children as well. All of them seemed to be imploring, “Give us something to eat, Ma, give us something.”

The sight filled me with intense anger and self-loathing. I wanted to curse myself. What I had taken to be an impressive piece of art had turned out to be the stony frame of a living man! The man’s face and eyes were so lifeless that he seemed to be made of rock. How could a living man turn into a rock? Who had turned him into a rock?

The woman and the two older children had extended their hands, and the Marwari gentleman was shouting, “Go away—get lost!”

However, the lady seemed overcome with pity. She admonished her husband, “Why are you shooing them away?” She gave the children food from the lunch basket, enough to satisfy them, and then she gave some to the woman. She opened another basket and gave them what was left of the bread and fruit. It was as if she had promised herself, for the sake of her own son, that she would not permit any child to go hungry before her eyes.

Tears rolled down from the sunken eyes of the old man, who was filled with gratitude toward the lady. They shone in that black face under the bright light. A few unintelligible words escaped from the corner of his

dry mouth, like the squeak of a mouse. I wasn't sure whether they were an expression of his pent-up grief or his joy at receiving something. But I felt that the sound came from deep within his sunken stomach. The old man kept muttering, "My village, my soil, cheats . . . cheats . . ."

I turned to the woman, who was standing near the old man, and asked, "Where is your village? What is he trying to say?"

The beggar woman, who was wrapped in a tattered sari, stared at me for a moment and then said, "He's my father-in-law. He misses the village all the time. He always breaks into sobs after receiving alms and says, 'I'm not a beggar. I'm not a beggar. I've been cheated. I want to go back to my village.' He's not able to speak coherently these days."

"But who cheated him?" I asked.

And the story tumbled out. The old man belonged to a village in the district of Balasore. He used to work as a labourer. He had to toil long hours each day in order to keep the family going. But the old man was happy. He got his only son married off. Gradually, though, his strength began to ebb, and he couldn't continue to work as hard as before. His son was nothing like his father. He didn't have any initiative, and he didn't like to work. Instead, he spent his time having fun with the other young men in the village. He returned home for meals and took it out on his wife when there was nothing to eat.

What could the poor young wife do? Somehow, she managed for ten days out of a month with vegetables from the backyard. But fate was ill-tempered. Floods and droughts alternated with each other, and there was no crop. Rice was nowhere to be found in the village. Those who had anything to eat hid it, while nature continued to revolt, destroying what was left of the crops. In the course of these disasters, the old man acquired three grandchildren. They were gifts of misfortune, and, out of love for them, he nicknamed them Flood, Storm, and Drought. But where was food to come from? Daily labourers could find no work, and people were leaving the village in droves. Even the old man's worthless son—unable to bear the sight of his hungry children and the complaints of his wife any longer—left in search of work elsewhere, never to return.

Then, one day, an important man came to the village. He looked at the old man and said, "How consumptive you look! You can provide

first-hand evidence of acute hunger and living death. Come to Bhubaneswar. You'll get food there. You'll get shelter and work too."

The helpless old man had held onto his wayward son's family, but he could not provide them with food. Now something akin to hope glowed within him. After all, what more did a labourer need? A bit of strength left in his body, and some work at hand. Why not go to the city if he could get that? And if the children managed to survive, eventually they'd be able to work, too.

They were driven to the city in the man's car. Their photographs were taken and published in the newspapers. Several well-fed and well-dressed people fussed over them for a few days. They asked questions and jotted everything down in their notebooks. They were sympathetic, too. But, in less than a week, the whole charade was over. A servant of the important man came to the garage where the family had been staying and turned them out into the streets, warning them never to come back again.

The old man was not one to give up. Striking his staff repeatedly against the pavement, he shrieked, "Babu promised to give us food, shelter, and work. Why have we come this far? Give us work! Give us work!"

The servant shouted back, "You had nothing to eat in your village. You've feasted here for six days. You can get plenty of work in the capital city. Work as a daily labourer or pull a rickshaw. If you don't get any work, beg. People here carry a lot of cash in their pockets. Your stomachs will be filled even if you have to beg. Now get lost!"

The servant chased them away some distance down the road. The old man started blabbering that he was not a beggar. The delirium continued from that day. It had been going on for years. He hated begging, but he had no other way to live. Even as his inner self revolted, he extended his hand for a piece of bread. This silent struggle between his soul and the desire to live gnawed away at his vitals. That newly married girl from that distant village now walked on the streets of Bhubaneswar as a beggar. Life's ways are beyond all understanding. This is all he thinks of. Nothing else.

There were no tears in the eyes of the woman whom I had taken to be a black granite statue—no sign of grief on her face. There was only an expression of lifelessness that made her seem even more poignant.

The Marwari lady sympathized with her situation. She took a sari and a blouse from her bag and gave them to her. She also gave her a one-rupee coin.

Without my realizing it, my hand was feeling the bills inside my purse. Ten rupees, five rupees, two rupees? Which amount would be most suitable? I wanted to be generous without offending her dignity. At that moment, the bell started ringing, and an announcement came over the loudspeaker that Puri-Howrah Express would arrive shortly on Platform No. 1. The passengers got busy gathering their baggage.

The beggar family that had created the illusion of art slowly moved away. I could not give them anything, even as I pondered the question of how much to give. How inconsequential my existence was in the face of their intense grief!

Their poverty and hunger were every bit as timeless as the art, dance, and music of Odisha.

Perhaps I smiled a little without being aware of it.

## *The Ring*

Pratibha Ray

Translated by Bikram K. Das

**H**e lay flat on the hospital floor, undisturbed by the hum of visitors, the traffic of nurses and attendants, and the stench of disinfectant—even by the buzzing of the flies that swarmed around his face. The other inmates of the ward, denied sleep by their assorted pains, aches, and other complaints, looked at him enviously as he slumbered blissfully through the afternoon.

There was overcrowding everywhere, from the maternity ward to the mortuary. So what if he had been denied a bed and dumped on the floor? Was it such a calamity? Even that seemed a luxury to the old woman. When she had set off with her young son in the back of the old truck for the hospital in Cuttack, everyone in the village turned out to offer advice. She wouldn't be able to get a bed for her son, she was warned, unless she knew some doctor in the hospital. She ignored them and rode off, after she had pawned her few bronze utensils.

Although they didn't get a bed, they did manage a place on the floor large enough for him to lie down—and that without a single acquaintance. She felt as though she had successfully crossed the ocean in a flimsy dinghy, without an oar. Did her son need a bed? Had he slept in one at home? Wasn't the smooth concrete of the hospital infinitely cleaner than the soggy mud floor of her hut? They had given him a plump cotton

mattress to sleep on, instead of his filthy cotton quilt. At home, the sun and the moon peeped through the thatch, but here he had a solid roof overhead. Wasn't that enough? Why yearn for a bed in the temporary home of a hospital? Greed led to sin and sin to death . . .

As soon as the word entered her mind, her heart began a furious drumming against her ribs. What an inauspicious thought; she cursed herself. May she be consumed in the flames of her own foul mind; what evil there lay in a woman's tongue!

To drive the thought away, she turned to look at the people around her in the ward. Everywhere, the sick and the maimed. Some with bandaged heads. Others with layer upon layer of dressings encrusting arms, legs, backs, bellies . . . peeling away, like insects moulting. Hollow eyes peeped out from scarecrow faces encased in bandages. How frightening! As if they were masquerading as ghosts to scare you. But no, this was no masquerade: the wounds beneath the bandages were real. In comparison, her son was unscarred. Not a scratch on him, not one scrap of bandage. Naked he had been, except for a loincloth, when he clambered up onto the babu's roof in the village to mend his thatch, in return for a day's wages . . . before he slipped and fell to the babu's stone courtyard. And, still almost naked, he now lay on the hospital floor. By the grace of the goddess Jagulei, not even his skin had been broken by the fall. He had merely fainted from fright.

The village's ayurvedic doctor had tried in vain to bring him back to his senses, and charms and spells were both ineffective. The lad had always been restless and fidgety, even as a child. And who could blame him: had not he lost an older as well as a younger brother? He must have been scared out of his wits, the rascal. Well, he would soon be up, once he got over the fright. The babu's daughter, who went to school in Cuttack, had made a senseless remark. After a fall like that, she said, people often remained unconscious for months; they could even be paralyzed. It was she who suggested that they go to the hospital in Cuttack, where he would be cured.

The old woman was furious at first. Who had ever heard of a man remaining unconscious for months? Was he a human being or the demon Kumbhakarna, who slept for half a year? But who can argue with the powerful? Besides, once the remark, however silly, reached the woman's

ears, she simply had to take her son to the hospital. She had a mother's heart, after all, though she knew quite well it couldn't be anything serious. If he had bled or broken some bones, she might have worried.

She had seen people knocked unconscious by a blow on the head—and not just seen it. She had lost her own husband to such a blow.

The family home was being partitioned, and a fence was to be erected across the courtyard. The brothers were disputing a patch of the courtyard no wider than a hand span. Words led to blows, and heavy wooden sticks were raised. She jumped in to intervene. "Stop!" she shouted to her husband. "Your elder brother has already claimed the lion's share in everything else. Does it matter if he gets an extra hand span of the courtyard? Is it worth fighting over?"

The courtyard was crowded with menfolk, and he could not afford to be seen listening to the counsel of a mere female. "Go away, woman," he roared, giving her a shove, making sure it was observed by everyone. "Who asked you to meddle in the affairs of men? Do not forget your place." And turning to his brother, he said, "The fence will be raised where I draw the line, or else . . ."

The words were scarcely spoken when the stick his brother was holding descended on his skull. Like water from an overturned pot, the blood streamed, bathing him from head to foot. He collapsed like a tree felled by an axe, never regaining consciousness. The corpse was carried out through the door, and the fence rose where he had drawn the line with his own blood. She remained, reluctantly, to bring up her fatherless boy, not knowing why or for whom she had survived but growing to a ripe old age, never once allowing herself to think of death but hoarding her happiness like a miser, through all her sorrows, until she saw the face of a grandson. Well, that's life. If one were to abandon it for the sake of another, would the world continue? The Almighty's design may be praised.

But since her son had not even bled, how could life ebb away as he lay unconscious? She bit her tongue again. How could she have such black thoughts when her son was sleeping beside her?

Her gaze turned from the bandaged patients in the ward to her son. How meek, how gentle he looked in his sleep, not that he was any different awake. She stroked and caressed him from head to foot. His face

looked exactly as it had in his childhood. Was it because they had shaved off his hair? It had been shorn once before, when he was seven, when his father had died. His tears had been more for his flowing locks than for his father. She had made a vow to offer his hair at the goddess's shrine when she could afford the ceremony, and so for seven years, no blade touched his head and he romped free like the infant Krishna, dangling his shoulder-length curls festooned with crow and pigeon feathers. Holding to his lips the short whip his father used to drive the bullocks as if it was the infant god's flute, standing with one leg across the other, his body triple-bent in the *tribhanga* posture he had seen in the plays performed in the village. "Look!" he lisped. "I am Ma Yashoda's darling son." The proud parents laughed at the child's theatrics.

How charming those thick hanging curls had looked against his chubby face—and how he had treasured them. Poverty allowed him no other indulgence, so he pampered himself with his hair. He hadn't even a rag to cover his back, but he would arrange his hair with infinite care before he set out to work. Passersby stopped to admire his crowning glory. Starvation robbed him of flesh and blood, dimmed the glow on his face, but not a hair of his head could it touch. And then the doctors in the hospital had to shave it off! Why on earth?

They had insisted it was necessary as they would have to take a picture of his head to find out if there was any injury inside. How odd. How could there be an injury inside the head when there was not even a scratch on the outside? God alone knows what the doctors saw in the picture, but all they did afterwards was lay him down flat on the floor. Not one drop of medicine did they give him, nor a drop of milk. No attempt to bring him back to consciousness. Doctors and nurses trooped past him to attend to the other patients, giving them medicines, injections, milk, fruit, and biscuits, but no one so much as looked at him.

As if there was nothing the matter with him—as if he was lying there for the fun of it. As if he would get up and walk away when his sleep was done. Well, God grant that it be so. But how could he leave in his present state? She pestered the doctors and nurses with her questions, but the only reply she received was, "We have to wait, Auntie, until his consciousness returns. Trust us—we will give him all the care he needs. But at the right time."



"I know," the old woman said, "but if he were to get some medicine or some milk, perhaps it would make him stronger so that he could regain consciousness sooner."

"Be patient, Auntie," they replied. "How can a man swallow anything when he is unconscious? It would stick in his throat."

She prayed to her gods, as she continued to stroke him. "Please, god, make him conscious now so he can have something to eat. He must be starved." All he had had since morning, when he went out to mend the babu's thatch, was some water in which they had soaked rice overnight. The rice itself was gone—her two grandchildren woke before the first crow cawed to gobble it all up. The gluttons. Her poor son had nothing. But why blame the children? That was the fate of the poor. Their pots were always empty, but never their bellies. Hunger filled them up. How strange God's ways were.

The stroking and caressing continued. Suddenly, she felt his fingers tightening, as though he was trying to clench his fist. Was consciousness returning? She massaged his palm and fingers, trying to straighten them out, to pass on the warmth of her own body into that cold hand. Her fingers came to rest on the middle finger of his left hand. For ages now, the old silver ring had gripped his finger tightly, as steadfast as an old friend that had sworn undying loyalty. Their hopes of getting a gold ring for his dowry were doomed, for providence had already chosen a poor widow's daughter to share his handful of rice. Where was her mother to find a gold ring? The boy's mother understood her plight. Since she was happy with the daughter-in-law, she chose not to make a fuss over the ring. Before the wedding, she had her old pair of silver toe-rings melted down into a solid ring for her son, which he accepted without a murmur. Thus are the golden dreams of the poor turned into silver or brass, or even mud and gravel. Compromises have to be made or life would be impossible.

The flat ring of beaten silver burned on his dark skin like a ruby. No ring of gold could have shone as brightly on his grimy, sweaty, knotted finger as the silver one did. At best, it would have looked pale, like brass, or like a faded gourd flower.

When he cleaned his teeth each morning with ashes from the hearth, he scrubbed and polished the ring as well—but gently, lest the metal should wear away. But no amount of care could avert the inevitable: hard work

was scraping the flesh off his bones and, along with it, the silver from the ring on his working finger. It was wearing thin. When it was new, one could see some fine engraving on it, but not anymore. The upper surface had been scrubbed as flat and shiny as a tamarind seed. Being pure silver, it was naturally soft, like her son.

What a misfit he was in the present age. Other labourers might shirk, but he would do the work of five. But the more hardworking one was, the sooner one became worn out. Old before one's time. Why did he have to climb onto the babu's roof? Couldn't he have remained on the ground and flung the bales of straw onto the thatch? There were other labourers working, too: surely one of them could have mended the thatch. But bow your neck once and the whole world will rush to strike you down. Someone as meek as her son was bound to attract trouble.

She went on caressing his face, his hands, his fingers, and the ring. The visitors were beginning to depart; it was already evening and it wouldn't be easy to find a bus back to the village. Kala Miyan, the truck driver who lived in her village, had been leaving for Bargarh with cargo when the mishap occurred, and it was in his truck that she and her son had travelled to Cuttack. He had left them at the hospital and driven away, telling her not to worry, since he would inform a few of their fellow villagers who were now working in Cuttack, and they would come to the hospital and look after them. Medicine and food for patients were provided free at the hospital. The old woman would have no need for money, other than the bus fare back to the village for her son and herself.

She would have liked to buy a few of the sweets wrapped in shiny paper for the grandchildren, as well as a whistle for her grandson. But where was the money? She had a two-rupee note folded and tied up in a knot in the tail end of her sari, but that was all. The children would sulk if she brought them nothing. They had wanted to accompany her to Cuttack; they even ran for a distance behind the truck shouting, "We want a ride!" Her nine-year-old grandson was a regular imp, while the granddaughter, two years younger, was as quiet as a lamb. Her brother had outdistanced her as they ran behind the truck, and as she tried to catch up, she tripped and fell on her face. The blood streamed from her split lip, and her scream of pain was so drawn out that the old woman thought she wouldn't breathe again. And that stupid daughter-in-law of

hers had stood there like a log, looking at the departing truck with wide eyes, instead of picking the child up and soothing her.

"I'll get some sweets and toys for you," the old woman shouted as the truck went around a bend in the road. She couldn't see their faces any longer. Poor dears—how would they manage without her? There wasn't a grain of rice in the house. How long could she beg and borrow? They would be waiting anxiously for her to return.

Her own stomach was churning with hunger. A few morsels were all she normally ate, but since the night before, it had been a total fast. Her son would have bought some rice for them with the wages he would have been paid when . . . well, that was all over now.

The hospital provided meals for patients but not for the relatives or friends who tended to them. As for her son, he was sleeping so soundly, there wasn't even a rustle. That afternoon, they had served rice, dal, and curry to the patients. Even though she hadn't tasted the food, she could tell from the aroma that the hospital had skilled cooks. She had tried to shake him awake. If he were fed, she could have something to eat as well.

She wanted to tell the attendants, "Is he going to lose his share just because he is asleep? If he can't eat now, there's always his mother." But she was too shy to say anything. What if they refused? She had never begged, even during the worst times. Would she bring disgrace upon herself, now that she had come to the city? Everyone in her village would come to know about it.

But where were the people from her village that Kalu Miyan was supposed to have informed? He had been in such a hurry to leave. How would she manage without help?

She felt a slight tremor in his hand. The breathing quickened. Was consciousness returning?

The nurse doing her rounds stopped to look. She quickly ran to fetch a syringe and gave him an injection. Two men in white aprons rushed to his side and pressed down heavily on his ribs. Good god! Even a healthy person would collapse under such rough handling. Was this how they treated patients at the hospital? And was it for this that she had brought him here?

"You'll smash his ribs," she shouted angrily. "Do you want to cripple him? Who'll look after his family? Can't you be gentler?"

They left him and walked away. Had she annoyed them? But how could she have remained quiet after what they had done to her son?

He wasn't stirring now. The nurse covered him from head to toe with a clean white sheet. The patients in adjoining beds craned their necks and peeped curiously like tortoises. All eyes were on that white sheet. But why? Couldn't he have a clean sheet, even though he was poor? It was the government that provided it, not them—so why should they whisper and mutter? Her son wasn't going to walk away with that sheet; he would surely return it when he left. He wasn't the sort who took what didn't belong to him.

That nurse seemed always to be in a great hurry, rushing madly around the ward. In her haste, she had even covered up the boy's face with the sheet. Wouldn't he suffocate? Even in the coldest winter, he liked to sleep with his face uncovered. "I'll choke to death in my sleep if my face is covered," he would say. "When I depart, it'll be in broad daylight, and not like a thief in the night," he had always joked. As if it was a joking matter. She quickly uncovered his face, folding the sheet back. He felt cold to her touch. The fever must be coming down. Thank God.

The nurse came back, looking anxious, as though a debtor was about to run away with her money. "Auntie," she said to the old woman, "do you have any relatives in town? Send word to them."

"I have no one here," the old woman replied, not comprehending. "All strangers. What do you want me to tell them?"

"You have no relatives in Cuttack then?" the nurse repeated. "And in the village?"

"No one who can help," the old woman said. "The daughter-in-law is a simpleton; her children are babies. This son is the only support I have." She stroked him fondly. Poor lad, she thought, has he had one decent meal since his father died, or a day's rest? Carrying the entire family burden on his shoulders.

"Do you have any money?" the nurse asked again.

"Of course," the old woman replied. "Could I have come to Cuttack empty-handed? There, that's a two-rupee note. You can have it if you need some money; the medicine and food are free here."

"No, no, you keep it," the nurse said hurriedly, "I don't need it. It's you I was thinking of."

"Me?"

"Yes. There's no point in taking him back to the village now." She saw the confusion on the old woman's face, hesitated, and then went on. "If you have neither money nor help, how will you manage here?"

"Well, if I could bring my son to Cuttack without help, I should have no trouble taking him back," the old woman said emphatically. "Once he's awake, we'll go back. What do I need relatives for? Has anyone ever come to help?"

"Your son is no more, Auntie," the nurse said in a firm voice. "There's no use taking him back. You have no money. The funeral can be done here; the hospital staff will remove the body."

She couldn't understand at first and only stared. Then the great rasping sobs came. She lay down flat, covering his body with hers. Pulling the sheet away, she caressed the still, cold body with both hands from head to foot, from foot to head. She covered his pale face with her kisses, until his cheeks glowed red with their blood. Pressing her face down on his, beating her forehead against his shaven skull, she howled out a lifetime of grief, reliving the past, flooding him with tears and memories of the games he had played in the dust as a child, the games that a cruel divinity had played on him, of laughter, tears, and hunger. Her fingers tore at the earth, ripped it apart. Then she beat the earth with her head. Scooping up a handful of dust, she smeared it on her son's face and body, howling madly, screaming, "Listen, you three hundred million gods, wherever you may be. Bring my son back to life! I don't ask for wealth, for palaces to live in. Only for a little air. Let him breathe again."

Her grief touched everyone in the ward. Eyes grew moist as they looked at her.

Her sobs subsided as she became exhausted. The sound of her sobbing changed. Grief turned to anger: she cursed her treacherous husband, the murderous brother-in-law . . . her son, whose treachery was greater even than his father's. She cursed the cruel gods who held in their hands the keys to life and death. The people of her village, the other labourers who had been repairing the babu's thatch, the babu himself, Kala Miyan the truck driver, the doctors and nurses, the hospital attendants. Those wretched patients in the ward who were witnesses to her grief.

Pain wrenched her ribs, her bowels, her flesh and skin, milked her entire being dry. The curses flowed in broken strings.

"May you find no peace in the three worlds, O father of my willful son. If you had to abandon me in my youth, why did you come in procession to my door with music and lights? Who asked you to parade your manhood, you eater of my happiness? Wasn't it enough that you stripped the bangles from my wrists? Didn't that satisfy you? You had to leave your seed in my womb, you cheat. And that son of yours, fourteen times worse than the father. What did you gain from cutting my throat, you fiend? Was it for this day that I nurtured you in my womb? And what did you profit from devouring my son, daughter-in-law, you wretched widow's offspring? Is your thirst quenched now, husband-eater? And that demon, my husband's elder brother—are you happy now? May the gods strike you with their thunderbolts . . ."

The sounds and language of her grief changed constantly, tender at one moment, harsh or obscene the next. The onlookers watched in silence. Did grief have so many faces?

Anger turned into a mother's tenderness, into hurt pride. "Go, go where you please, wherever you can find happiness," she said indignantly to her son. "Let your mother suffer. Let her face the world alone. How does her plight affect you? Can't you see for yourself how strong she is? How did your conscience allow you to abandon her, with the burden of three helpless souls on her shoulders? What tricksters you proved to be, father and son. Shirkers both. You were too cowardly to face the world, so you left a feeble woman to carry your burden. Why did you build a nest? Well, go, go. If you had no time to think of me, why should I be bothered with you? Does one have any claim on another in this world? It's all deceit, all illusion. Nothing but lies."

She consoled herself into silence. Turning away from her son, she fixed her vacant gaze on the darkness outside, as though she had not a care in the world, or was too exhausted to care. Thus she sat for hours, immersed in her own thoughts. When she seemed to have recovered her composure a little, a nurse and two attendants approached her. "Auntie," the nurse said, "we will have to carry the dead body away. The doctors won't allow a dead body to lie here all night among the living patients. Your son's funeral rites will be performed well, Auntie. Don't be worried."

She looked up, startled. In a pitiful voice, she said, "All I have is this two-rupee note. Will it be enough?" She burst into tears.

"There's no need for money, Auntie," the nurse said. "It'll all be free."

"Don't delay now," the nurse said to the attendants. "Make arrangements to remove the dead body." Then she left.

The two attendants bent low to whisper to her, "How can it be entirely free, Auntie? Give us whatever money you have."

Eagerly, she untied the knot in her sari and gave them the two-rupee note. There was not a trace of miserliness in her. He had never been anyone's debtor while he lived; would she allow him to be a debtor in death? Why should strangers remove his body free of charge?

She caressed him one last time, pouring every drop of love into that last kiss. "Go, my son," she said, bidding him farewell. "You never knew what happiness is. Perhaps you'll have some happiness now."

The attendants reached out to lift the corpse. Bending, they said, "Auntie, let him go now. It is getting late. Why such fondness for a mere lump of clay?"

Slowly, gently, she brushed her hand across his face and body, gripping his rigid, half-clenched fist in her quivering fingers, allowing the last tender drops of love to drain away. Then she got up and shook herself free.

The attendants lifted him off the ground; one gripped his arms, the other his feet. The old woman's fingers were still interlaced with his, as though locked into them. She could feel the ring, so dear to her son. Suddenly, as though she had abruptly come to her senses, she clutched the ring and tugged at it with all her strength. The attendants had been eyeing the ring hungrily. "How greedy you are, old hag," they said. "Robbing your dead son!" But she ignored them. Finally, the ring came free.

The onlookers, who had been numbed by her grief, were shocked. Sympathy turned into loathing. "How mean!" they said. "Is she a mother or a block of stone?"

The attendants carried the corpse away.

"Where are you taking my darling son, you wretches?" She howled as she followed the attendants through the door, out into street, for a short distance. "May Death take you!" The mother's grief stunned sky and earth, tree and leaf, into silence. The darkness swallowed up her son. Only the ring glistened in her fingers.

## Spark of Light

With infinite care, she secreted the ring within seven folds of her sari's tail end and tied it up in a knot, her eyes focused on the path along which they had taken her son.

How dark it was.



## *Man of the Century*

Premalata Devi

Translated by Snehaprava Das

**T**hey look upon me as a rebel. There is a long list of criminal charges against my name. I am regarded as a misfit in their civilized world. The government has probably announced a reward for my arrest. I am different, they say—maybe anti-social, or barbaric, or a dangerous combination of other such disparaging adjectives. These adjectives, I feel, when linked to my name, seem to magnify my personality. The mere mention of my name sends a shiver down the spines of so-called civilized individuals.

Am I so frightening?

I don't think so.

I know that I am not a superman. I am just another ordinary human being born into a modern, self-centred era. Maybe I am not as kind-hearted as some who live in this age. Maybe my looks arouse revulsion and my thoughts are diabolical. But, for me, life is just a bizarre blend of discordant moments.

I don't remember when I began to take note of the world around me. I do not know the exact date of my birth. The man who stamped his name on me to give me my identity was in no way important. It was enough for me that I was a human child. My natal hearth was somewhere in a dirty, squalid shack in some nameless land unnoticed, unidentifiable on

the world map. I don't know whether I should pity or thank the woman who carried an ill-shaped, rickety creature like me in her womb for months and lived on the satisfaction that her motherhood gave her. More often than not, my heart hankered after the soothing touch of her bony, turmeric-tinted hands. Later, when I realized that one has to strive hard to survive in this cruel world, I tried to bury those feelings deep within me.

I recognized that the planet I live on is an evolving mass. Civilizations change, and I wondered whether human civilization was heading toward progress or decadence. Probably the latter, I thought. Enormous frustration boiled up within me and enveloped my very being as the truth dawned upon me.

It must have been an ominous hour at which I slid out of my mother's womb to land on a little patch of damp earth and began to whimper, beating my tiny hands and feet as the light of the morning sun hit my eyes. A mysterious, indistinct voice whispered in my ears, "You are the Lord of Destruction. Look at the vast desert of black loss stretched ahead of you. This is where you are fated to live—where poverty, pain, hunger, and deceit reign. Your arrival has heralded Doomsday."

The tableaux of terrible memories trudged past me, each one a witness to the truth of the prophecy pronounced at the time when I made my fateful entrance onto this planet.

One of the bitterest of these memories was the silent suffering of my innocent father. He had within him an element of honesty worthy of King Yudhisthir, which destroyed him. He proved to be a misfit in a society that thrived on crime and corruption when he refused to honour a forged bill. False charges were made against him, and he was dismissed from his job. His efficiency, honesty, and sincerity could not save him. He inflicted the punishment of self-exile on himself and moved to another place with his family.

His daughter, the eldest of his children, decided to shoulder the responsibility of the family and, with what little education she had, managed to get a low-paying job. But things only grew worse. Like most girls in a similar plight, she was constantly hounded by a bunch of lewd, amoral young men. Finally, one day, as she was on her way home from work, they forced her into a car and took her to some unknown place. My father lodged a First Information Report at the police station, and a case was

opened. But the sons of big shots are always beyond the reach of law. Sometime after they abducted her, they sent her back, unhurt. I don't know whether they were moved by pity or fear. But the ordeal was too much for my sister to bear. She strangled herself. Her body hung from the hook in the bedroom.

My father sat on the veranda dry-eyed, his mouth hanging open. As he sat there, with his hand on his head and his vacant gaze fixed at nothing in particular up in the sky, a nicely decorated jeep fitted with a loudspeaker drove by the back of our house, broadcasting feminist slogans.

Hazy images of social progress began to move along the track of my memory, one after another, and a muffled cry of despair escaped my throat, despite my best efforts to suppress it. I could see a college teacher assaulted by goons disguised as social workers for the offence of catching red-handed a student who was cheating on an examination. There was another—an old man. Some hooligans snatched his only means of survival, his pension payment, from him as he was walking down a crowded road. The man screamed, but no one came to his rescue; the motorbike sped away and blended into the stream of vehicles flowing down the road.

The inability of my father to work within a corrupt system; the agony of my helpless mother, who could do nothing except curse her fate; the picture of the lifeless, pathetic body of my sister were tests too tough for me to endure. Determined to seek the help of those who held the sceptre of justice, I approached the men at the helm. But no one had any compassion for me. I saw them lurching out of a bar in broad daylight. Their glazed eyes did not notice a pitiable creature like me. Nor did my appeal and my grievances reach their callous ears. Instead, I was jeered at, kicked to the roadside like a stray dog. When I saw the men in power conduct themselves in this manner, shame spilled over me, like some dark fluid. "My life might be worse than that of a street dog," I concluded gloomily, "but the morals of these human beings are no better than those of the dog."

"Why should you live such a bleak life?" a voice inside me asked. "Stop being a living corpse," it advised. So I decided to join the mainstream and become one among the many who believe that social progress and the death of morality go hand in hand. I would release the brute lying dormant in me and live life to the hilt. I would not be a defeatist like my father, an honest teacher. He had failed to face challenges and had cowered in

the face of every little thing. I would not shed helpless tears like him or waste time cursing society. Nor would I blame or beg God. I have learned that one does not need a God in order to survive in the jungle of human beasts; one needs the craft to counter the stack of odds. There is nothing called God. If ever there was one, he is dead now. That God would never have foreseen how treacherous life could turn out to be!

Hence, I took a vow to eliminate my humanity. First, I killed my conscience; next, I severed the ties of relationships. I knew that no man can kill another unless he kills himself first. I wiped out all sense of righteousness, ruthlessly rubbed all morals and ideals from the canvas of my soul. I was filled with abhorrence when I watched the old values, humanitarian principles, metamorphosing under the pressure of selfish motives. Heavenly bodies have never violated the law of nature and have never been guided by selfish interests, nor have air and water ever been miserly in showering their benefits upon humanity. The human being is perhaps the most uncouth, unscrupulous creature in God's world, I decided.

Slowly, I began to lose faith in beauty. I could not stand the fragrance of flowers. I would have liked to uproot all flowering plants and grow a forest of cactuses, the lightest touch of which would draw blood. Words like *pity*, *compassion*, *penitence*, and *love* had no meaning as far as I was concerned. Crimes filled me with elation. I rejoiced at the sight of a mother trading her child for a handful of rice, the dishevelled hair and torn clothes of a molested woman, the gory, disfigured body of a murdered human being, or an educated boy reduced to polishing shoes by the roadside. Humans fought bloody battles with other humans at the smallest provocation. I was terribly excited at the sound of the battle cry.

I am eager to have all human virtues replaced by a brute instinct. I shall send a destructive stir through whatever calm still somehow manages to exist. The virus of annihilation bred in the heaps of violence and terrorism around me has entered my blood and proliferated. I will contaminate civilization and extinguish it. I will shoot an arrow of conspiracy and distrust to pierce humanity at its very heart. I will scatter seeds of fiendish crime everywhere. I shall laugh aloud when Mother Earth begs from the Creator the boon of blessed barrenness. "Let the world that has been shunned by humanity be eliminated," she will cry in despair. She has reached a stage where she cannot foster new life—she cannot

lend it her salubrious lap to grow up in. I represent the final batch of humankind she has produced. And I am her loved one. The memory of my noble precursors might at times bring a flood of nostalgic tears to her eyes, but she knows the truth—that it is this last batch of humanity that can guide her to the path of salvation. The robotic human beings of the twenty-first century will spin around in a diabolical whirlpool until catastrophe strikes. Mother Earth might be muttering curses, camouflaged as benediction, on me.

But I will never die. I am the man of the century. I shall preserve and nurture my being and continue to exist in the demonic, spiralling tides of dissolution.



## *The Mystic Bird*

Archana Nayak

Translated by Chandramoni Narayanaswamy

**E**ven if there are no books worth purchasing, one can at least run into many old acquaintances by making the rounds of the book fair in the evening. For that reason, Harish Babu used to spend almost every evening at the fair while it was on.

One evening, while making his usual rounds, he wandered into the stall of an English publishing house. As he was leafing casually through some of the books, he noticed an attractive one filled with photographs and descriptions of rare birds from around the world. Turning the pages, entranced, he was suddenly arrested by the picture of a particular bird.

He examined it carefully, although, having forgotten his spectacles, he couldn't actually read the text. He thought about buying the book, but his wife had asked him to pick up a few things, and he didn't have enough money with him to buy the book—which was priced at five hundred rupees—as well. Since it was almost closing time for the fair, he decided to come back the next day and look at the book more closely. Just then, however, the man looking after the stall commented that the publisher would be returning to Delhi in the morning.

Harish Babu hesitated. Someone else in the stall had begun to show interest in the book—so, in the end, he was prompted to buy it.

On his way home, he recalled an incident from thirty years before, when he was teaching at a college in Bhubaneswar. His wife had taken the children to Bombay to spend the summer vacation with her sister, so he was alone in his quarters. One day, a very close friend, Saroj—an engineer who was working in the Koraput district, in connection with the Balimela Hydroelectric Project—paid him a surprise visit. He insisted that Harish accompany him to Koraput and spend some of his vacation with him. So Harish arranged for a relative to look after the house and left for Balimela with Saroj.

Harish liked the place, which was surrounded by forests. Every day, he drove around in Saroj's jeep, revelling in the sight of the Jhanjabati River, the Bagra waterfall, and scenic spots like Chatikona.

Saroj had arranged for a man named Singua to accompany Harish. Singua, who belonged to a tribal people known as the Keya, had only one eye and was probably about fifty years old. After spending some days together, the two became quite friendly. Singua kept harping on one topic—because of the construction of the Balimela Dam, at Chittrakonda, a large area of forest would be submerged under water. Couldn't this be prevented? He was under the impression that, if Saroj wished, he could stop the construction of the dam. How could Harish make him understand that the decision had been made by people much higher up and that Saroj was only one of the many individuals charged with executing it? Despite numerous explanations, however, Singua could not seem to grasp the idea.

Harish asked him why he was so worried about the forest being flooded. Singua replied that there were places in the forest where birds from heaven came to visit. Harish was amused to hear this, but, not wanting to hurt Singua's feelings, he asked whether he had ever seen such birds. Singua remained silent, rousing Harish's curiosity, so he repeated his question several times.

Finally, Singua answered him. Harish still clearly remembers what he said that day.





“Sir, you see that bald hill in the distance? My village is on the other side. Almost everyone in the village cultivates finger millet, hunts in the forest, and digs up roots for a living. At the edge of the village, my father had a smithy, where he used to make arrows, daggers, and so on. Even people from neighbouring villages used to come to our smithy. The income was hardly worth mentioning, but we somehow managed to eke out a living.

“I was nine or ten years old, and I used to go to the smithy to help my father. One day, quite late in the evening, we had locked everything up and were on our way out when we heard a grating sound. We stopped and listened, thinking that wild animals might be prowling around. Suddenly, four people emerged from the darkness. They were wrapped in blankets, with pieces of black cloth tied over their faces, and they were armed with bayonets.

“My father shook with fear when he saw them, but I wasn’t afraid at all. I knew who they were—dacoits, robbers. But why should they trouble poor people like us? We couldn’t understand their language, but it didn’t take us long to figure out what they wanted. Two of them had their wrists bound together with a chain. Apparently, they had escaped from some jail. They brandished their guns, ordering us to cut the handcuffs off.

“My frightened father opened up the smithy and removed their handcuffs. Before leaving, the dacoits gave us some money and indicated with signs and gestures that if we told anyone about the incident they would kill us and our whole family. We knew they would do as they said. Father threw the broken pieces of the handcuffs into the fire. After that, every now and then, other dacoits would appear, wanting to have their handcuffs cut off. We were living in the shadow of fear.

“One day, the police arrived. They started interrogating us. But neither my father nor I confessed what we had been doing—instead, we asked them what dacoits looked like. The police left. Though we felt relieved at our escape, we were still fearful. We were certain that the police did not believe us and must be keeping an eye on our smithy. Our only hope was to get wind of their approach, as they had to pass through the dense forest to reach our place. After all, the police would not come stealthily at midnight like the dacoits.

“Some time passed, during which we removed the handcuffs of a few more dacoits. Some had escaped from jail, but others—often with the help of the police themselves—had escaped on the way to jail after being arrested. We had no interest in knowing anything about them. We were lured by the promise of money. Having become adept at this work, we were earning a decent income.

“The police never came back, and our worries gradually vanished. One day, two men bound together came straight to our house, at midnight. My father opened up the smithy, and, as he was discussing payment, got busy cutting off their handcuffs. The dacoits were praising him, saying that many of their friends had escaped the police with his help. My father was nodding his head happily.

“All of a sudden, police surrounded us on all sides. The two men were policemen disguised as dacoits. But how could we have known that? The police beat my father mercilessly and took him away with them, leaving us in grief. Father never came home again. We heard that he had been sentenced to a long jail term.

“Our days passed in hunger and deprivation. I had four brothers and sisters, all younger than me. My mother had some disease and suffered constant abdominal pain. Only I was in a position to earn something. The only work I knew was what I had learned from my father in the smithy. But the police had demolished it and warned us not to reopen. We had been living on the money paid to us by the dacoits. Now, after father was taken away, we had nothing to eat, and my brothers and sisters had started scavenging in the nearby forests for roots and berries.

“I felt very restless at home. I wanted to work, but I was at loose ends. One day, a bunch of us Keya were sitting in the forest, gossiping. One of them said that his grandfather had told him that, in a certain part of the forest, a rare bird could sometimes be sighted. Its head was a deep red colour, with blue and white feathers, and its beak was bright gold. It let out a strange sound. It would lay only one egg in its life, and that egg would take a whole month to hatch. Then the bird would spend another month teaching the chick to fly. During that time, the bird would mostly stay in the tree where it had built its nest. Then it would vanish. People thought it came from heaven. Very few people had ever seen it.

“The man said that he had heard another strange thing about that bird. It was supposed to possess a rare gift: it knew where a particular root could be found in the forest. Iron chains would break and locks would open at the mere touch of that root.

“I was startled to hear this. I inched closer and asked him whether it was true. He said he didn’t know—it was just something he’d heard from his grandfather. The others weren’t paying much attention to what he said and, since it was getting late, had started to go their respective ways. But I did not. Instead, I followed that man all the way home, with the intention of meeting his grandfather.

“The grandfather looked like an ancient bird himself. From his posture, you’d think he had been sitting there for ages. I questioned him closely, to get more details. He said that whatever his grandson had said was true. But I had a hidden motive. I was obsessed with the idea of removing handcuffs, and, after hearing what had been said that day, I felt that my luck had turned. I wanted to learn all about the bird and use it to search out the root. The old man said he had no idea how to locate the root, but I had a feeling that he was hiding something. I left, but, a month later, I returned with a pot of liquor for the old man. I massaged his arms and legs, hoping he would tell me what he knew so that I would be able to find that bird.

Finally, one day, the old man revealed the secret. Since the bird had only one fledgling, it would watch over it with great vigilance. It built its nest in a very tall, leafy tree. After the egg was hatched, the bird would leave the nest only briefly, to get food for the chick. If, during that short time, someone managed to climb up to the nest and bind the chick’s legs and wings with a fine wire, the bird wouldn’t be able to teach the fledgling to fly. Then it would carefully examine the chick’s body to find out why it couldn’t flap its wings, and, having found the problem, it would go in search of the root to set the young bird free. The root should be plucked from the nest only if it was still there after the bird had set its chick free and taught it to fly. The old man warned me again and again that if the chick was injured in any way, the bird’s curse would bring down a series of calamities on the culprit.

“I memorized everything he said. From that moment on, I would roam about the forest all day. To find that bird was my only goal. Since I’d been told that the bird comes in winter, I would spend that season living in a

wooden structure up in a tree. I spent five years like that, sir. One day, when I was wandering about the forest, I heard a strange call. I looked up, and there was the bird. Its beak glittered like gold in the sunlight. The tuft of feathers on top of its head looked like a rainbow. My eyes fixed on the bird, I pinched myself to make sure I wasn't dreaming. Several minutes passed. It was still sitting there. By scanning the treetop, I located its nest. I knew that the bird would not leave that tree.

"I had vowed to sacrifice a cock as an offering to our forest goddess if she would show the bird to me—and I had lost count of the offerings I had vowed to give her if I got the root. So, after marking the tree, I went to propitiate the goddess. I had no fear of losing my way. After all, I'd grown up in the area and had spent five years roaming the forest.

"The following day, I reached the spot well before nightfall and sat under the tree to wait, covering myself with a blanket. At last, one day, I heard a chirping sound from above and knew that the chick had hatched. Now I had to wait for only a few more days. But I was still impatient. I passed the time thinking of all that I would do to earn money once I got the root. After about eight days, I saw the baby bird peeping out of the nest. The mother would have to fetch food for it. During the short time she was away, I climbed the tree to the nest, tied up the chick's legs and wings with a thin steel wire, and slipped back down. Then I waited for the mother to notice the problem.

"Another week passed before I heard the bird flapping her wings and letting out strange noises, and I knew she had discovered what had been done to her chick. Awash in anxiety, I watched the bird constantly, waiting for her next move. I had no desire for food or drink. I was physically motionless, although my mind was racing. I would prick up my ears at every sound. From time to time, I could hear the baby bird trying to flap its wings in the nest above. Probably, having grown a little, it could not sit comfortably with its legs and wings tied up.

"It seemed as if that evening would never come. The thick fog of the month of Pousha was gradually descending on the forest. The setting sun appeared quite dim. Sitting under the tree, I scanned every direction, determined not to miss the bird no matter where she came from.

"Suddenly, it seemed as if a thick fog had broken through the mist and was rushing toward the tree. I fixed my eyes sharply on the tree. The

yellow rays of the setting sun seemed to glimmer in that moving fog. In the bright golden beak could be seen a piece of thick red root.

"I felt as if my pounding heart would burst out of my chest. I could hardly breathe.

"The baby bird, which had been starving for two days, peeped out, saw its mother, and started chirping excitedly. Then, in a desperate effort to fly, it slipped out of the nest and fell—and an animal pounced on it and carried it off. Seeing this, the mother bird swooped in very fast, making loud wailing sounds.

"I had seen the root fall from her beak. Unable to stop myself, I threw off the blanket and ran to look. The bird saw me and, thinking that I was the one who had carried away her chick, flew toward me at lightning speed and pierced one of my eyes with her beak. I lay there writhing in pain, and the bird started attacking my entire body with her razor-sharp beak. I couldn't get up and run away. I was covered in blood. After a time, I lost consciousness.

"Early the next morning, I woke up and sat leaning against the tree. I knew I had lost one eye. My whole body was bloodied. Still, the hope of getting the root had not left my mind. I had no desire to see whether the bird was still around. When the mist cleared, I started looking all around for the root I had seen in the bird's beak, but I searched in vain. The place was full of dry twigs and creepers. I collected some into my blanket and then stumbled back home. Only the hope of finding the root in my bundle gave me the strength to limp through the dense forest for miles, despite being wounded in every part of my body.

"But our dilapidated mud hut wasn't there. On the spot where it had stood were a heap of fresh ashes and three half-burnt corpses. I guessed that this must have been the work of the dacoits. Perhaps the police had tortured my father in jail and, with the clues they got from him, had arrested them. Or else my father had identified the dacoits, and, in revenge, they had set fire to our hut the night before, killing everyone inside. I lay there looking at the three bodies. I recognized my mother's body but could not make out which of my four brothers and sisters lay dead there. I had lost the strength to look for the other two.

"After three days, the police van arrived. My guess was right. After the dacoits were identified, tried, and sentenced to death, their comrades

had taken this terrible revenge. The police thought that I had also been attacked and wounded by the dacoits. They took the blanket in which I carried the twigs and roots, shook it out, and wrapped me in it. They took me to a hospital and got me admitted. I was not in any condition to talk or protest.

“Sir, I spent two months in the hospital, recovering. I did not go back to my village. Now I do odd jobs here and there. All this happened long ago, but that bird is still pursuing me. Exactly at sunset, I see a patch of fog rushing toward me with wings spread. Sometimes I feel it will pluck out my eye with its beak. There’s no blood now, but I feel as if a knife has been plunged into me. Occasionally, the bird appears in my dreams and talks like a human being. ‘Just you wait—I’ll kill you. I’ll see that the forest is submerged under water. Didn’t all of you join together and kill my child?’

“Sir, I am a great sinner. My family was destroyed because of my evil deeds. Now this forest, too, will be destroyed. There are so many forests and so many rivers in the state. Why did the government choose this forest for destruction? Nobody else is to blame, sir. Only I am responsible for all this.”



That day, Harish Babu’s heart had been moved by Singua’s sorrow, and he could not help believing what he had said with such conviction. But, when he returned to Bhubaneswar, the people he told laughed it off as mere superstition. Bird experts couldn’t say whether any bird fitting that description had ever been sighted.

The first thing Harish Babu did when he got home from the book fair that day was put on his spectacles and read what it said about the bird. The description tallied almost perfectly with what Singua had told him. The book even said that the bird lays only one egg in its lifetime and is greatly attached to its offspring. And the final sentence mentioned a belief among local people that the bird has some astonishing powers.

But the book also said that the bird’s habitat is the Galapagos Islands in the Pacific Ocean, off South America. It never leaves that place and has never been sighted in any other part of the world. Harish Babu wondered

how Singua and the old man from the Keya tribe could have seen that bird in the forests of Koraput if it never left those islands. How could these forest dwellers know so much about that mysterious foreign bird? And yet, when so many other things they had said turned out to be correct, why shouldn't the curse of the bird also come true?

People believe that terrible calamities are caused by the curse of man. But why couldn't Chitrakonda have been buried under water because of a bird's curse? Otherwise, when a seemingly insignificant and long-forgotten event suddenly materializes in some awful form after so many years have passed, who can explain the mystery?

Harish Babu heaved a great sigh and closed the book.





## *The Lotus Man*

Mamata Dash

Translated by Supriya Kar

**N**iranjan must know. Subhadra felt anxious. While sipping his morning tea, Niranjan asked, “What’s the matter with you, Subhadra? You haven’t seemed your usual self for the past three days.”

Subhadra didn’t respond. But Niranjan was persistent. He coaxed her a little and asked again, “Please tell me.”

“Oh, why are pestering me? Nothing’s the matter. Nothing at all.”

Niranjan began to blabber on about his plan, as he had before: “At last, Madhuri and Nirmala agreed. I told her straight: a sick wife like you, a scoundrel of a son like Ajay—I would have committed suicide, but Subhadra saved me. I’ll give her a plot of land. I’ll build her a house. Otherwise, where would she stay? She has no one to call her own. Madhuri growled and went away, her face all twisted. Such an unattractive face—and would twisting it up make it look any more beautiful? Then, yesterday afternoon, my eldest daughter, Uma, came over from her in-laws’ house. As she was massaging my limbs, she started in. ‘Father, just give Subhadra Ma some money. That plot of land would cost fifty thousand rupees. And then you want to build a house for her on it! Father, we aren’t your own, but she’s your everything. I can’t show my face in

shame before my in-laws—please have mercy on us.’ Uma was sobbing. But did I care?” Niranjan was boasting.

“Let it be. I don’t want anything. Don’t say all this—I don’t like it,” Subhadra said.

Niranjan always spoke like this. He claimed his rights over her, but he didn’t trust Subhadra. She was not his wife. She was not his beloved. Subhadra had brought Niranjan into her life and offered him a wife’s trust and a beloved’s longing, but what everybody said was that she was Niranjan’s mistress.

The vulgarity of the word “mistress” stung Subhadra, deep within her bone marrow, every moment, like a dark spider. It wove its web. Sometimes, she came face to face with that spider. Her stomach would writhe and she would immediately go and vomit. At the beginning, though, it was different. She thought a divine love tied her and Niranjan together. The love she read about in stories. Love between souls, love with great sacrifice and profound dedication—like that of great poets, great men and warriors. Gradually, the truth revealed itself. She was no beloved, no wife. No, she was not even a friend—a friend was never tortured like she was. There was no place for suspicion in friendship. She was just a mistress—how humiliating.

Beyond this routine, their relationship could not move forward. Niranjan would come every night and leave before daybreak. Sometimes they would go to the city and have dinner together, or watch a movie, or do some shopping. Or Niranjan would be seized by some sudden suspicion and beat Subhadra until she offered an explanation. Their relationship was formed within these limitations. There were moments when they tried to break out of this rut—moments when Subhadra cried, burying her face in Niranjan’s chest, and moments when they listened to beautiful songs on the tape recorder.

Subhadra had passed her matriculation exams and had been teaching at the village school. Niranjan was a successful contractor in a nearby village. Upon hearing of Subhadra’s reputation, he had come to ask her to tutor his younger son. Eight years ago. Subhadra had gone to his house, but as the relationship developed, she left tutoring behind. Niranjan’s wife was a sickly, short-tempered woman. She was very frail. The eldest son had turned out badly. Nirmala was his second son. Fearing that his

younger son might not take any interest in his studies, Nirranjan had hired Subhadra as a tutor. Subhadra's lonely life had become more secure as both became dependent upon each other. Subhadra's mother went mad, and, one day, her dead body was found floating in the village pond. Had she committed suicide? Who knows!

Nirranjan had not come for three or four days, and Subhadra felt helpless. Sitting alone, she cried all afternoon. In the evening, God knows why, she walked down to the pond. She slumped down on its bank. One side of the pond was full of weeds and lotus flowers. The water stirred in the cool breeze. The vermilion dust and smoke of the evening had settled on the water, on the lotus leaves and petals. As the temple bells rang amid the sound of gongs and conches, a strange mood descended on her. The water crows flew and dived at the water, while a flock of birds rose from among the weeds and disappeared into the multi-hued clouds. Subhadra sat in a trance.

Three or four days ago, Nirranjan had arrived at night—drunk, too drunk. He had scolded her, saying her sari was too thin. He had forced himself on her. He had insulted her crudely. That day, Subhadra had taken a good look at Nirranjan's face. She had noticed his greying moustache, his red eyes, his rough face, and the ugliness of his thick lips. It occurred to Subhadra that she must be quite a bit younger than Nirranjan. He was going bald: his head had just a few remaining hairs, some grey, some still dark. His limbs and hands seemed to be made of bricks and cement. In the past, she had taken to him—why? Such shame, belonging to this man—and she belonged to this man for the rest of her life! Subhadra suddenly pushed Nirranjan away. He fell out of the bed. Subhadra threw up violently in the bathroom and then went off to sleep in the kitchen. Angered, Nirranjan had not come back to see her since that day. Subhadra was upset, very upset. That was why she sat on the bank of the river. One day, her mother's corpse had floated in this water. Somewhere here, her mother's ghost might be roaming.

Subhadra looked around. Dense *kia* bushes spread far into the distance. A few stars twinkled in the sky. A flicker of light could be seen from the village. She could see her village and her one-room house. She sat there quietly. The darkness thickened. Suddenly, a splashing sound came from the water. Who? Subhadra's feet and hands were icy with fear. Who was coming?

A shadow emerged from the lotus bushes. The shadow stood very tall. Subhadra thought of running away, but she could not move. The shadow walked across the water, drawing closer. Subhadra saw that it was a man, his body twined with lotus flowers, his limbs and hands made of lotus stems. Nothing else was clear—where were his nose and his eyes? This man made of lotuses—who was he? Subhadra stayed sitting down—she could not escape. She closed her eyes. “Get up. Come with me,” the lotus man said, not in words but in silence. Subhadra felt exhausted. The fragrance of lotus filled the air. Who was he? He lifted her by the hands. As though she was under a spell, Subhadra followed him. They entered the wet *kia* bushes in the moonlight. They sat there. The lotus man asked her a question, and Subhadra responded.

The echo of that response came from the sky, from the pond, and from her small pathetic room in the distance. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Infinite unfulfilled desires rang like bells.

Subhadra hung like the golden dust of the lotus from that man and rubbed herself against his entire body. The lotus man pulled away the past and present that had spread within Subhadra and threw them into the river. How new everything seemed, how new everything was, she thought, and, later, she could not remember how she had taken leave of the lotus man and gone home.

Niranjan came to her the next night and begged forgiveness for his behaviour. But Subhadra didn't remember anything. In that state, day after day, for four or five days, Subhadra went to the bank of the pond. After she had sat there for a while, the lotus man would emerge from the water, and the moment her eyes fell on him, she would close her eyes. They would talk to each other in silence, touch each other. He would lead Subhadra into the dense *kia* bushes.

No matter how hard she tried, she could not open her eyes. She thought of telling him and asking him so many things, but she was at a loss for words every time. Who was the lotus man? Was he a god? Or someone's spirit or ghost? All day long, she would mull this over, unable to do any chores properly.

An hour or two seemed like ages to Subhadra. Those moments seemed like a festival of strange union. When it came time to say goodbye, Subhadra would be completely exhausted. The lotus man would put a lotus

flower in her hair. He would touch her closed eyelids, lips, neck, back—and then gradually move away. Subhadra would walk back to her house. She would take the lotus out of her hair, still feeling as though she was under a spell, and place it carefully in a water jug on the table by her bedside.

When Niranjan came in the night, Subhadra did not have the slightest idea what he said or did. She seemed to have lost her reason.

She would look at the withered lotus and kiss it, plucking off its petals one by one. One day, Niranjan asked her, “Who gave you this lotus flower?” Subhadra lied and said that her maidservant, Shanti, had brought her the lotus. Niranjan did not trust her, and finally one night he said knowingly, “You’re trying to hide something from me—you’ve fallen in love with someone else!”

Then he tied a thin, glittering gold chain around Subhadra’s neck. Her mother’s memory came to Subhadra’s mind. Subhadra’s mother had worked as domestic help in other people’s houses but had made sure that her daughter got an education. Subhadra had not seen her father since childhood. When she was offered a job, she promised her mother that she would one day buy a gold chain and ring for her, but, only three or four years later, her mother began to lose her mind. Maybe her mother had drowned herself because she was in anguish about Subhadra’s relationship with Niranjan. The dream of buying a gold chain had died with her mother. That was why she had no desire for anything.

All she desired was the lotus man—she wanted nothing else. If Niranjan found out, he was sure to cause trouble. But he had some clues, and his jealousy was evident in his behaviour. He was rough and vulgar at times, but Subhadra didn’t care at all. Since the day she had first met the lotus man, all her nights were dreamy. Butterflies flitted about where she threw away the withered lotuses. She would see the lotus man inside her house, in the prayer room. Sometimes a dot of fire dazzled between her brows.

Trust, mistrust, reality, illusion—what do these words mean? she asked herself. But she had no answer. Could her destiny turn so divine? To whom would she confide all this? But why should she tell anyone? Niranjan’s mistress, Subhadra, had, in reality, become an exceptional creature. At times, though, she would be filled with anxiety. What if she got pregnant? So far, she had not been pregnant—it was impossible. But now?

Could she rear the lotus man's child? What would she tell the world? Niranjan would kill her if he ever found out. What would the lotus man do? He would be lonely.

She would ask the lotus man. If he didn't answer, she would make him. She would open her eyes and see him. What game was he playing? What would happen to Subhadra—did the lotus man know? She would ask him today.

But Niranjan arrived that evening. He was supposed to have come at midnight. Subhadra couldn't go to the pond. Niranjan had brought food for Subhadra. He caressed her repeatedly. Her stomach churned. She felt like vomiting. Irritated with Niranjan's violent embraces and kisses, Subhadra asked him, "What's come over you? Do you think I'm some kind of puppy?"

"I'm so happy. You would not forget me for a lotus flower."

"What do you mean?" Subhadra asked with a start.

"I followed you the last three days. What kind of obsession, you crazy girl? Wouldn't I have got a lotus flower for you, if you'd asked me? But you wander about at night all alone, among the *kia* bushes, in the pond—a snake could have bitten you, a ghost could have devoured you, my Subhadra. I've had the pond cleaned—now, if you like, go sit there. Ah, your obsession with lotus flowers. What's come over you these last couple of days, acting like a stick of wood. My Subhadra, my golden girl, my treasure." Saying this, Niranjan kissed her again.

Suddenly, that big dark spider in Subhadra's blood laughed out loud. The insect had such a big family, and all of them leaped around in her veins. Inside her head, a sea of failure started pounding. Subhadra pushed Niranjan away and vomited in the bathroom. Niranjan turned his face away and fell asleep on the bed. Subhadra lay on the veranda floor, crying.

Niranjan left before daybreak. Subhadra washed her face and went to the pond. It was true—there wasn't a single flower in the pond, nor was there any trace of weeds. Instead, there was just crystal clear water. A pink sun sparkled on the water. Who laughed or cried among the *kia* bushes? No one, no one at all. A broken clay pot lay nearby. Subhadra scooped up a little water from the pond in it. The water carried the fragrance of lotus. In her house, on her bedside table, Subhadra kept the water in a bowl

and said, "Stay here. I may wither, but please don't you ever wither." The water rippled—somebody laughed or cried somewhere.

But what if Niranjan came again and saw? Subhadra was restless with anxiety. Again she spoke to the golden water, "You wouldn't let anyone enter this room, would you? What do you say? I wouldn't let anyone in, would I?"

What the golden fragrant lotus water said in reply no one but Subhadra could hear.





## *A Fistful of Hope*

Golap Manjari Kar

Translated by Madhumita Chanda

**T**he shouting and screaming of his sister-in-law, punctuated by his brother's more muted reproaches, filtered through the inner courtyard. Nabin closed his sleepless eyes, as if to shut out the sound. He was accustomed to these arguments by now, and to the complaints of his mother, lying on a torn mat, which nonetheless made him irritable. If only he could just run from the house and escape! His lips twisted into a sardonic smile. When had he ever run with his all but nonexistent legs? But his spirit was whole. When his father was alive, Nabin had run countless times on his shoulders, and he got mad if he wasn't taken to fairs in nearby villages. Perhaps it was this physical impairment—his inability to stand on his own two feet—that made his father so devoted to him. His father would breathe fire if anyone dared to make fun of his son.

Once, when he was still quite young, a fair arrived in a neighbouring village. Lifting Nabin onto his shoulders, his father had walked the two miles so that they could watch the puppet show. He sat him down in a corner outside the main gate and went off to buy the tickets. Festivity hung in the air. The place was elaborately decorated, and, as Nabin looked with some bewilderment at the brilliant blue and red lights, someone dropped a ten-paisa coin into his lap. And lo and behold, within minutes, countless ten-paisa and twenty-five-paisa coins piled up in his lap and

around his missing limbs. He looked up at the people and then down at the two short stumps of flesh that were his so-called legs and started to cry.

When his father returned with the tickets and found him with the small heap of coins, he was furious. In a blind rage, his father, who hadn't laid a finger on Nabin in his whole life, let loose a barrage of kicks and slaps. He thundered at people passing by, "You think my son is a beggar, do you? And you are all such great babus that you gave alms to my son! Did he beg money from you?" Hearing his tirade, a small crowd gathered around them. "Oh! Stop it!" someone cried, while another asked, "What's the fuss about? You've made some good money off your son and now you're angry about it?" As Nabin sniffled and sobbed, his father lifted him up onto his shoulders and stormed back home. After that day, wherever he went, he never left Nabin, even for a moment.

His father wanted him to get an education, so Nabin was enrolled in school. While his father was alive, he used to take him back and forth to school. His brother was already in Class 9, while Nabin was only half-way through his education, when their father died suddenly of a snake bite. And, like a wheelbarrow toppling over, Nabin's life was abruptly upended. At the sight of their mother's grief-stricken face, the two brothers fell silent, and their pranks ceased. Nabin's mother and brother began working as day labourers in the house of the same *zamindar* whose farmland his father used to till. What they earned was enough to quiet the pangs of Nabin's stomach but failed to satisfy his soul. He felt unwanted, as though he no longer had a place in his family. His world was now limited to his room and the veranda outside, although once he went as far as the bank of the river, balancing somehow on his brother's frail shoulders. Slowly, he learned to plant his hands on the floor for support and drag his body painfully along, and this became his normal practice.

In the meanwhile, the young bud was quietly unfurling into full bloom. At times, his aunts who lived nearby would stop in to see him and lament, "God has sculpted his face like that of a prince . . . but . . ." One would hide her face with her sari and wipe away tears, and another would ruffle his mass of curly hair. His body was like burning coals, tormenting his skin and bones. For no apparent reason, he would grumble at his mother and refuse to talk to his brother for a day or more. All the same, when his brother wasn't around, he felt completely forlorn. Even though his brother

was not as magnanimous as his father had been, Nabin loved him deeply. Nabin was only two years younger, but his brother treated him like a child. Nabin was also good friends with the small children in his village. They would sit on his lap while he showed them card tricks, played the flute, and made funny faces, causing them to roll about with laughter.

No one from his own age group became Nabin's friend. Who would be interested in being friends with a cripple? But Nabin never felt sad about this. He may not have legs, but he did have two arms as strong as crow-bars. His mother brought him clay, and he moulded it into beautiful dolls, decorating them with vibrant strokes of colour. He also painted strips of bamboo and then wove magic with them, designing lovely winnowers, hats, and baskets. But he never bothered to learn how much money his handmade goods brought in or what it contributed toward the monthly household income. All he cared about was that he was not worthless. That was enough. When his mother and brother weren't home, he worked away and sang songs to himself. People who heard him singing said that his voice was beautiful. He laughed at this compliment. Still, it brightened his spirits.

One day, Sebati, a girl who had studied with him when they were small, listened to his songs and looked at the dolls he had made and showered him with praise. That night, he couldn't sleep properly. The slow smile playing on Sebati's lips and the sparkle of her eyes floated like shadows through his fitful sleep and captivated his heart in his dreams. He understood, better than ever before, that he wasn't a child anymore. That feeling buffeted his soul deep within and made him strangely desolate. The vast world outside wasn't meant for him: he could be an onlooker, but he couldn't join in. This truth dawned upon him in a fresh way. And so his days went by, with his mother, his brother, his dolls and songs, and his dreams of Sebati.

Everything changed the day his brother got married and brought his sister-in-law home. His sister-in-law quickly became a close companion. Her bashful look and soft rippling words made him oblivious to his own physical impairment. They played games together, like snakes and ladders or dice, and their discussions ranged all over the map. When they were alone in the house, they would sway back and forth listening to the song "Dei ja dahiwali."

For some reason, though, after her second child, she became very irritable. She didn't laugh the way she had earlier; she just looked sour the whole day long. And then, only a year later, she gave birth to a baby girl. Three small children now clung to her frame, which was as frail as a vine. Nabin's mother no longer worked, since she was beset by assorted ailments. Nabin's dolls, winnowers, and baskets piled up in a corner by their house. Who would go out to sell them? Every now and then, someone would wander along and buy one or two. Nabin didn't sing anymore, nor did his soul beckon him to decorate the dolls he made. If only he could find a way to entertain those three children, it would lighten his sister-in-law's load and allow her to finish up household chores more easily. But he couldn't run after them or take them out for a stroll.

Eventually, the stacks of things by their house got so tall that they spilled over to the house next door, and the pitch of his sister-in-law's voice likewise grew higher and higher. Seven starving bellies—seven downcast faces stared at the two hands capable of earning something. Nabin's mother wept inconsolably, her body emaciated from her prolonged illness. The reality of his incapacitated state made him restless. He felt like jumping into the swollen river or killing himself by eating rat poison. Only the thought of his ailing mother held him back. Poor thing, it would be a great relief for her if she died, and then nothing would dissuade him from choosing his own path.

Daylight sliced into the semi-dark room. Nabin had no desire to move, but, as he did every morning, he dragged his body up and began his daily routine. Leaning against one of the pillars on the veranda, he sat quietly. Then, late in the morning, when his sister-in-law placed a cup of salted black tea and a fistful of puffed rice near him, he slowly fed his mother. She had stopped complaining. She simply looked on, tears streaming from her eyes, which were clouded by cataracts. Of late, when his gaze fell on his mother's face, his heart writhed in pain. He stretched out his hands and stroked her head gently. She resumed her incessant sobs.

At that very moment, he heard his brother's voice from outside, "Naba . . . Oh, Naba . . ." It had been ages since he had last heard his brother call out to him so cheerfully, and he was startled. Then his brother swept into the room like an unstoppable breeze and hugged him tightly. "Guess what, Naba! The government has decided to give wheelchairs free of

charge to people like you. I've put your name on the list prepared by the village *sarpanch*, humbly asking him to give you one." He rattled all this off in one breath and then lifted Nabin up and cradled him in his arms like a baby. Their mother wiped away her tears and, with clasped hands, stood in front of the calendar of Sri Jagannath, printed by the cigarette company, to pay her obeisance, murmuring something indecipherable. His sister-in-law rushed in, setting aside her load of work. Nabin was caught in a dilemma, not knowing whether to laugh or cry. The beaming face of his brother, the joy brimming in the clouded eyes of his mother, and the wide smile spread across his sister-in-law's face—all sent shivers down his spine. Would he really get a wheelchair? he wondered. He wanted to believe it, but in his heart he wasn't convinced.

The following month, the Minister was scheduled to come to the Block Office, almost five miles away. There he would give wheeled chariots to those, like Nabin, whose bodies had no wheels. Nabin's brother heard that four names had been recommended from their village. Of the four, Nabin had the most severe disability, and everyone assumed that whether the others got a wheelchair or not, he would certainly get one. Some thirty days melted away like ice turned to water, but Nabin was strangely unable to feel the time passing. His nights were spent with open eyes, while his days were filled with dreaming. The sway of the *kash* flowers by the riverbed, water like the sparkle of stars dripping from the ivory of Sebati's bare waist—his eyes were lined with the kohl of dreams. The fragrance of thousands of blossoming flowers and the shining wings of swallows turned his life from a flowering plant rooted in the earth into the call of blue clouds. He felt neither thirst nor hunger. It was as though his stomach was filled with sweets that satisfied all desire for food. Days were like fleeting moments, while every moment had become an interminable age. As he was counting the countless waves of hope on the Yamuna River, the month came to an end—and, while he was waiting for this moment, the small circle of his life had expanded.

For Nabin, night had ended, although it seemed that the reddening of the eastern sky and the cawing of crows at daybreak were purposefully delaying their arrival. Even his mother was listening intently to catch the first caw. Though crimson hadn't yet splashed the sky, the entire house was already in an uproar. All three children were begging to go with their

uncle. Nabin wanted to be able to show them what, for him, would be the wealth of all kings, his priceless Kohinoor diamond. But the children were so small—how would they cover a distance of five miles? Moreover, his brother would already be exhausted from carrying him on his back or shoulders. And the day wouldn't end there. The Minister would come!

Perched on his brother's shoulders after he didn't know how many years, he left the village. By the time they reached the meeting place, the sun had touched the noon sky. There was a huge gate with two flowering banana plants on either side of it. From the gate right up to the main dais hung strings of *deodar* leaves and multi-coloured streamers—the blues and reds and the flags. He felt as though it was his marriage day, as though all these festivities and beautiful decorations had been made exclusively for him. Sitting on his brother's shoulders, he felt a sense of triumph, as if he had won a great victory. His brother made his way through the boisterous crowd and, placing Nabin on the ground close to the dais, began to massage his own aching back. Poor fellow, how he had laboured over those five miles. Had it been some other day, his brother's pain would have made Nabin blame himself, would have made him feel inferior . . . But that day, he looked at his brother's face and murmured to himself: "For this day only. Will you ever carry me on your shoulders again? From now on, won't I be able to go wherever I wish on my own?"

There was no sign of the Minister, even after Nabin had emptied two cups of tea and munched on the chops and *gulgula* that his brother bought for him. Again and again, each and every pair of eyes swept down the road, newly covered with red carpet. Sweet memories were about to envelope him—and then the Minister arrived amid a huge fanfare, as people blew on conch shells and trilled their tongues. The *sarpanch* scattered flowers along the Minister's path, led him up to the dais, embraced him, and placed a garland around his neck. Once the sound of clapping hands had died away, the Minister began his speech. What a kind-hearted man he was! His heart seemed to bleed for those who had a disability of some sort. Like the rest of the crowd, Nabin swayed his head and clapped, just like a wind-up toy. He smiled at the people around him, but his eyes remained glued to the stack of new wheelchairs gleaming in the sun.

His speech concluded, the Minister stood up to give away the wheelchairs. He looked like the generous Karna of the village opera. Next to him

stood the Block Chairman, who read out the first name from the list. And the smiling Minister caressed the disfigured body of the incapacitated and helped him into the chair. From that day forward, the chair belonged to him. Nabin didn't blink an eye. It seemed that someone was hammering on his chest. His throat was parched—dry and sticky. He felt that the moment his name was called, his life would force its way out through his eyes. He licked his dry lips and swallowed. He looked at those who had already been given wheelchairs, whose eyes were brimming with gratitude. He clasped his brother's hand tightly.

One more wheelchair . . . the last one. Now it was his turn. His brother patted him on the back and stood up to lift him onto his shoulders. He felt that he would burst into tears any moment. Perhaps everyone present could hear the loud thudding of his chest. He clutched his chest with one hand and with the other supported himself to jump onto his brother's shoulders. But why didn't his brother lift him up? Instead he stood immobile, like a wooden doll, eyes fixed on the dais. Nabin, too, turned to look. Their village *sarpanch* was making his way toward the Minister, holding Satiya Barik's hand. True, one of Satiya's legs was little short, but he hopped around the house and could easily do all his work. He limped and hobbled more than usual, though, while he was led up to the chair. He clasped the Minister's hands and sniffled tearfully.

Nabin again scanned the scene. Why weren't there any more chairs? Where was his? Where were the shining blue wings of his swallow . . . the winged chariot of his dreams? He was unaware of the staff he was holding slipping from his hands, of falling under people's trampling feet, of the crowd scattering after the ceremony. He felt only the soft familiar touch of his brother's hands and the unintelligible words in his choked voice. The riverbed, the swaying *kash* flowers, the moonlit night and the ruptured dreams of Sebatu that had left him breathless. With one hand, he clutched the deep cry of despair rising from the bottom of his heart and, with the other, he groped for the strewn dreams that he had seen with open eyes. His brother's ice-cold hands picked him up and held him close. He beat his head against his brother's stony chest and wailed, "Give me my wheelchair, brother! Oh, give me my chair!" It seemed that from the village orchard, someone grimaced at him, echoing his words: *Give me my chair . . .*





## *Curfew*

Sanjukta Rout

Translated by Priyadarshi Patnaik

**A**gain, Nagma looked at the seven-month-old baby in her lap and burst into tears. The infant had been squirming for a long time, hungry, and now was pulling at the dry skin hanging from her breast with its newly sprouted teeth. No milk. But then silence, as if there was some strange delight in nibbling, pulling, sucking at its mother's flesh—but only momentarily. Then that piercing shriek again.

Inside, a flickering kerosene lamp. In its dirty dim light, a ghostly play of shadows within the small thatched hut. The pots and pans, the earthen vessels hanging from the thatch, the two children, Akhtar and Dulla, leaning against the wall, Sattar sitting with his feet on the chicken coop and head on his knees, and even Nagma herself—all looked like shadows. Using the pillar in the centre as a support, Nagma sat still. Lying next to her outstretched hand was a wicker basket with a few handfuls of puffed rice. Akhtar and Dulla sat quietly, glancing desperately at the rice. They could quickly snatch the basket away. But Nagma had a very sharp tongue and could really scold. In a flash, she would drop the child and pounce on them, raining blows and slaps on their backs and screaming about why there had been a curfew in Cuttack town for the last five days and why Sattar was not going out to pull his rickshaw.

What else could Nagma do! This curfew had turned her to stone. Otherwise, which mother would not give a handful of puffed rice to her children? But the rice puffs were all they had. For five days now, there had been a curfew in the city. It was different for the rich. Their houses were stocked with food. Even when a storm came, they could swing gaily on their high branches like weaver birds. But poor daily wagers, labourers, and rickshaw pullers! At the slightest threat of a storm, like grasshoppers, house sparrows, bats, their worlds were shattered.

At one corner of the house, the chicken coop. Small wooden doors. The hens were calling from inside. Once in a while, flapping their wings, they would move around their enclosure. Yesterday, Nagma had flung in a handful of puffed rice. But what was there today?

Sattar had been resting his feet on the coop and sitting quietly for a long time. He was ignoring the brief remarks that his wife would utter from time to time. He knew that if he took her words to heart, that with his rage and hunger, he would lose his mind and beat his wife to death. What a quarrelsome woman! Is she the only one raising a family? Throughout town, rickshaw pullers were sitting quietly at home. There was no fire in anyone's kitchen. Everybody's children were hungry. Who asked you scoundrels to be poor? Go and be born in rich houses. Bloody hell, even if there is a hundred-day curfew, you can have delicious dishes and sweets!

It was better not to talk about the slum. That one could live and survive in such a place was difficult to believe when you saw it. Along the main drain of the municipality in Cuttack was a long line of small huts that all looked alike. About fifty of them. All had dilapidated tin doors, the thatch in disarray. You could see torn baskets, mats, and other odds and ends drying on top. Broken earthen pots and pebbles and, among them, in front of each house—a rickshaw. On some verandas, sewing machines. This neighbourhood had mostly poor people. Some pulled rickshaws, some worked as tailors. Sattar pulled a rickshaw. Before that, he was a pickpocket. Gaffar, Abdul, and then Sania, Panchu, Jagaa from the other street—they all used to pick pockets at the bus stop or in the station. One day, the police caught Sattar and gave him the thrashing of his life, and he gave up picking pockets. Then he worked in a bakery for a few days. Now he had given that up and pulled the rickshaw owned by Mr. Panda, a lawyer.

At the corner of the slum stood Mr. Panda's house. Three storeys. Next to the tiny houses of the Muslim slum, Mr. Panda's house looked somewhat incongruous. On occasion, Mr. Panda opened the window of his house and hollered, "Oh Sattar, bring the rickshaw here!" His wife was very nice. On hearing of Sattar's woes, she had called Nagma and given her work as a maid in the house. From time to time, she would give Nagma puffed rice, flattened rice, dry *roti*, and old clothes for the children. On the day of the riot, she had called out from her window, "Sattar, be careful, there is a riot in the town." Then she had called Nagma and given her some *roti* and rice. The curfew started a few hours later. Everyone shut their doors and waited inside quietly.

Outside, on the road, the police vehicle was on the lookout. Groups of policemen in khaki uniforms were scanning the neighbourhood with guns in hand. Yesterday, Gaffar Mia had been thoroughly thrashed. Since he was a ward member, he had disregarded the curfew and come out on the road. The police had beaten him black and blue.

Nagma suddenly said, "I can hear the mob from around the corner. They must be setting fire to the garage."

Sattar replied, "Whether it is the garage or our thatch, what can we do? This happens when bad times come. In this town of Cuttack, for hundreds of years, Hindus and Muslims lived like brothers. My grandfather used to sew mattresses. He built this place. Father also did the same thing. But I couldn't do that kind of work. Under this thatch, I will spend my whole life. Then my son. Then his son. On this side, Panda Babu's house. Next to it, the teacher Mr. Patnaik's house. Next, Hamir Mian's tailor shop. Next, Mukunda Babu's house. Next . . . Next . . . Hindu . . . Muslim . . . Hindu . . . Muslim. What happened suddenly? Bloody hell, these politicians have eaten up the country!"

Tears filled Nagma's eyes. She said, "Gaffar is the real scoundrel. And then Razak. Both were inciting others the day before the riot. I heard it. I had gone to the municipality pipe to get some water. Fatima said, 'These Hindus are not to be trusted. They will drive us out of here. Kill all of us. Gaffar is making hand bombs. Razak got petrol bombs from somewhere. If necessary, he will wipe out the Hindu slum at night.'"

Akhtar and Dulla looked at their mother with pleading eyes. God knows what was going through her mind. She pushed the basket with

the rice puffs toward them and said, "Go ahead, eat it up. Swallow everything. When it is gone, what will you have? Your father has been sitting at home for five days now. When he was earning, half of it went to his liquor. Where was the money to save for bad times?"

Sattar went mad. He jumped up from the chicken coop, rushed to Nagma, and, with his face inches from hers, said, "Let me not hear that again. I'll wring your neck. Whose money—yours or your father's? With whose money do I drink? It's my hard-earned money. I'll do what I want with it. Who are you to interfere, you bitch?"

Nagma felt furious. But then, Sattar had hardly eaten anything the last three days. A few drops of rice starch, a dry piece of *roti*. Nagma knew that people like Sattar could turn into monsters on a hungry belly. It was better to keep quiet. She walked out to the veranda and looked out as far as she could see, all the way to the road. The road twisted and turned and spread across the entire town. On other days, thousands of people were on these roads. Children going to school. So many vehicles every day. But within moments, all was transformed. The entire city was silent—a desert.

She failed to understand. These people lived so close—thatch touching thatch. They supported one another in times of need. Panda Babu, Raghav Babu, and, from the other street, Kusunia and Raghav—so much like a family!

Then why does so much hatred remain hidden inside the human heart?

In a moment, everything had turned topsy-turvy. No one could trust anyone. The day before the riot, some old people from the Muslim area had gone from door to door and then moved into the Hindu area. Sattar had gone along with them. He had promised. He would not allow any kind of rioting in the street. But the moment the curfew was imposed, word spread that Mukund Babu had collected an arsenal of knives, swords, and other sharp instruments, had gathered a group of boys from the nearby village in his downstairs room. If necessary, he would blow up the slum. And Nagma had rushed inside, frightened, and shut the door.

Akhtar and Dulla had eaten the rice puffs and had then dug a small hole in the ground and were playing with marbles in it. Sattar was smoking a *bidi*. Nagma looked at him and asked, "Is there no starch water in the pot? My empty stomach is making my head reel. I can't imagine how you manage!"

She forgot the quarrel of the last few minutes and said, "Yesterday, the loudspeaker was announcing that the curfew would be over today. Why, nothing happened!"

"All of them are a bunch of scoundrels, out to cheat the public with lies. Even now, every day one or two houses or shops go up in flames. The police see everything and yet are blind. The culprits go scot-free and the innocent are put in jail. How can the curfew end? Why, today, there was another fight. Someone was stabbed in the belly."

From the thatch hung pots, pans, and baskets. In them, Nagma had kept some tidbits. When food became scarce, she used whatever was in those nooks. It was the house of a daily wager. A day without work and one had to go on an empty stomach. How could the children understand all this?

Maybe in another two years, Akhtar would start working in a garage and earn his bread.

Nagma started searching in those pots and baskets. But what was there in them? Why did people try to cheat themselves like this? She knew that the rice puffs were the last of the lot. But, then again, that searching among pots . . .

She was suddenly reminded of her mistress, Mrs. Panda. She thought she would go quietly behind the houses. Mrs. Panda was so kind. Maybe she would offer some food. Sattar could never bear hunger.

Behind the houses, it was still quieter, absolutely deserted. Next to their house was Billu Uncle's house. Nagma held on to the thatch for support and looked at Mr. Panda's house. Until the day of curfew, the house had worn the look of normalcy. The children were playing on the roof. Her mistress was talking to her from the balcony. But now all the open spaces and the balcony were covered with sheets and blankets. There was no way of knowing what was happening inside. Nagma softly moved nearer. Each of her footsteps was loud to her frightened ears. She finally reached the kitchen window and stood outside it. From inside, the sound of kitchen utensils. Was it the mistress or Bhaskar the cook?

Nagma again looked around carefully. She thought she would put her mouth next to the window and call softly—to Bhaskar or to Sabi, the maid. She peeped inside. No one. She tapped softly.

"Who is it?" she heard Bhaskar's voice.

"Nagma," she said. Silence inside. She tapped again. No one responded. She said, "It is me. Tell the mistress I have come. The children have been hungry for days. Anything—a little rice or flour. Somehow, I can manage today. Tomorrow, probably, the curfew will be over."

Still, no one came.

She rattled the shutter again. And again. And again . . .

Nagma could hear whispers from within. She listened carefully. The mistress was saying, "Poor girl, please, let's give her some rice."

But the master said, "No. No use showing mercy to that lot. That scoundrel Sattar is hiding petrol bombs inside his house. He is a friend of Gaffar. Once the curfew is over, I will not let him have the rickshaw anymore."

Nagma slowly retraced her steps. Standing outside her hut, she thought, Was it really Allah who had created so much hatred and suspicion in human beings?

Sattar was pacing in the house, hands behind his back. Seeing Nagma, he said, "In the prison, I was in a room like this. Tied up. For seven days. Today, I have no handcuffs. But there was food, and I had faith that Mother would definitely get me out of there. Then Mr. Panda, the lawyer, managed to get me out on bail. Somehow, now I have a feeling that this curfew will be endless, and I will never be able to pull my rickshaw again." Nagma wanted to say something but couldn't. Mr. Panda would now search for a Hindu rickshaw puller.

Sattar looked at the quiet Nagma again and said, "I am a poor illiterate and cannot speak words of wisdom. But, after reading the *Namaaz*, I feel as if all the people in the whole world are alike. All children of one God. Only men have created these differences. Tell me, has God stopped the breeze that flows through this great carnage? This same air keeps the Hindu, the Muslim, and the Christian alive. Are you sad because the Mistress didn't give you a handful of rice? It is not her fault. Because I have a police record, the police still keep an eye on me. How can she believe in me?"

Then Sattar slowly removed the wooden planks that blocked the side of the chicken coop. White and black, grey and brown, hens of all shades ruffled their feathers and spilled out into the hut making clucking noises; on they went to the veranda, digging the earth in search of food. Sattar could feel their rapid movements and their pecking all around him. Raising his hands above his head, roaring with laughter, he said, "Go away.

Nothing to worry about. Roam freely. Peck on the roads, bushes, drains, and garbage dumps—peck away and eat worms and grains, eat your fill. What is the curfew to you? It is made by man for man. Religion is only an excuse here. You have neither religion nor caste nor language that police will shoot at you. Go, shoo, go away. I tell you, go away!”





## *The Trap*

Yashodhara Mishra

Translated by Jatindra K. Nayak

**S**hobha stepped out of the kitchen, popped her head around the half-open bedroom door, and looked in. Manu was not in his bed. He was not in the drawing room either. But his moped stood leaning against the wall. Shobha forgot the frying pan on the gas stove and rushed into the drawing room. The door was closed. Thank God. Manu must be in the bathroom then. Shobha rushed back to the kitchen to attend to the frying pan, where something was beginning to burn. She had to finish her cooking, get ready, and reach her office by nine o'clock. Manu would go back to his hostel in two days' time, and once more, the house would become quiet and empty.

Manu bustled in. "Give me a cup of tea, Ma." He sat down at the small kitchen table. "Quick, please!"

Shobha threw her son a glance while cooking and asked, "How come you took your bath so early?"

It seemed Manu had no time at all. "A hot cup of tea, Ma! Please!"

"What's the hurry? Wait a little. I have made *alu parathas*. Let me fry a few. Have your tea with *parathas*."

Manu looked at his mother. She was so busy she did not have the time to look up. He said meekly, "I'll have my breakfast later, Ma. Let me have just tea now. I'll be back in ten minutes. Got something urgent to do."

Shobha turned the *paratha* over and over on the pan, maybe to fry it faster or perhaps to avoid having to say anything.

Manu came up to her. "Come, let me make the tea. Keep the *parathas* covered. I'll surely return before you leave for the office."

Shobha knew at such moments that something in Manu's calm, casual voice made her lose her calm. Blood rushed to her head.

Looking straight into Manu's eyes, she asked, "Now just where do you have to go? Tell me. Yesterday, on a holiday, you went off God knows where and came back at midnight."

Manu suppressed a smile while straining the tea. "I was back by ten o'clock, Ma. You were watching TV then, remember?"

Shobha kept her voice low but spoke each word distinctly. "All right, say ten o'clock, then. You come home for just two days. If you don't like staying at home, why do you come at all? Haven't you got friends at your hostel?"

Manu sipped his steaming tea. "Why lose your temper for no reason, Ma? Shouldn't I go out to meet a few old friends?"

Shobha flung the hot *paratha* onto a plate and looked at her son's face. She saw that he had already left home and was with his friends—no trace of the breakfast or his mother in his face now. She raised her voice as if to make sure he heard her. "So who are these friends of yours, tell me then? Do they care for you? Do they ever come over to your place?"

Manu sat down at the table again. "All right then. I'll have my breakfast. You cool down now."

Shobha put a fresh *paratha* on the frying pan. "Friends, friends, friends! Having fun all the time. Why, I never get to see them once you leave!"

Manu couldn't help a small laugh. "But why should they come here, Ma?"

The next moment, he realized he should never have said such a thing. Shobha exploded. "Of course, why should they come here? It is only you who keeps running after them, to watch a film on their VCR or to have a free meal in a restaurant!"

Manu stopped eating and glared at his mother. "So what? How much pocket money do you give me for films or to eat out?"

Shobha turned around and faced her son, fuming. "What did you say? Will you repeat that? Who is paying for your hostel expenses, for these fashionable clothes you are wearing? Your father?"

Manu left the table. Smoke rose from the burnt *paratha* in the frying pan. Shobha screamed, "Go to your rich father and ask him to buy you a VCR!"

There was no reply from Manu. She walked to the kitchen door and looked into the drawing room. The two-wheeler was still there, leaning against the wall. Manu slammed the bedroom door shut. Shobha shouted after him, "Why take it out on the door?"

She went back into the kitchen and muttered away to herself, "Why spend money and come all the way to spend a few days here? What for? Tell me. I get up before dawn to cook your favourite dishes. I wear myself out at my job to earn money. To cut laundry expenses, I wash and iron your clothes myself. And our lord goes off with his friends to have fun!"

Shobha restrained herself and wiped her tears with the end of her sari. Overwhelmed by a sudden feeling of shame, she realized once again that it was not she who had said all this. Something inside her made her mechanically repeat words she had learnt by rote years ago. She could not say for how long these forgotten words had lain stored up in some recess of her mind. It seemed as if the mind did not take the trouble to find new words when that feeling that was so painfully familiar possessed her. As if an old gramophone record would turn on by itself to play back memories of a long-lost time. It stopped for a moment only when she tripped over some irrelevant words.

"Why is it only me who should be toiling day and night? It is office during the day, cooking and household chores in the evening. I am your maid, right? There for you to use when you please, the way you wish!"

Not only this. The same old replies would hit her ears, as if coming from the same record: "I'll do as I please, okay? I'll go where I like. I'll never come back. Just because you are earning a few rupees, you think you own me?"

It was like a book with the pages all jumbled up.

Shobha put away the frying pan and the dough. Let his breakfast be. She would prepare his lunch before leaving for the office. As it was, it was getting late.

Manu opened a book and tried to focus. He read it aloud, explained it to himself, and took notes. The closed door would not let the wounding words through.

After a long while, Shobha gently opened the door. She stood for a moment holding it. Manu's face, propped on his palm, was hidden from her view by his left hand. How did it look just now? Was the expression harsh? Shobha grew anxious; deep inside, she felt she was drying up like a damp floor. She felt afraid. Was there a hot breath in her words that hardened Manu's tender face?

Manu was beginning to look every bit like his father. Whenever he strode into the house in the thin light of dusk, his shoes clicking, Shobha would return to a past that she thought she had left far behind. In those early days, whenever she came upon that tall, fair-complexioned man at the college, or on the maidan, or at a picnic, she would be filled with a strange gratitude for having met him. Even after she made that man her own, became the mother of his child, all her daily vexations, all her memories would melt the moment he walked into the house in the evening, after a day's absence. His magical presence would pervade her whole being. She would walk up to him, lay her hand on his heart, and tell herself: this man belongs only to me.

But then the dim light of the sixty-watt bulb would intrude, or water would gush out of a broken tap on the unwashed utensils in the kitchen. The man's face would change, like shifting clouds. He would say, "How long will the cooking take? Let me go out for a stroll. I'll eat when I come back."

Shobha knew he would never be back for dinner. The curry would get cold, the neighbouring flats would get quiet, dogs would bark in the street below, drunkards would bawl. Shobha would wait, like the heroine of some old movie, dozing by the window.

If Shobha stopped him, saying, "Why not eat first and then go out? Why must you go out . . . ?"

Then, like a gramophone record spinning round and round, the storm would come. It would lay everything to waste, and, after it subsided, everything would become quiet.

Shobha could no longer recount all she went through in those days. Something would snap inside her, like the locking of a door.

Let it be. That was another time. No more of it.

Shobha went over to Manu. Placing the duplicate keys to the flat on his open notebook, she said, "I am going. If you go out, come back and have your lunch on time. Your examination is close at hand. I was only asking you not to waste your time."

Manu did not lift his face. He heard the front door close. He now looked at the page he was writing: a few lines from the book had somehow found their way there, without leaving a trace in his mind. He put down his pen. It had been decided that all the friends would meet at Arun's house. The plan had come to nothing. He glanced at the table clock; maybe there was still time.

He could do what he liked in that little flat on the third floor. There was no one to stop or restrain him now.

In the drawing room, the divan lay in a mess. These days, his mother used it as her bed whenever he was home. She had been so busy cooking all morning that she had not had time to tidy it up. Normally, she couldn't bear to have the house look untidy. The bedroom was crammed with household articles, with only one bed. Manu would often tell her, "Ma, you sleep in the bedroom. I will sleep on the divan." But she would not listen. Manu worked at his studies late into the night. The table in the bedroom, the floor, the bed—all would be littered with books within hours of his arrival. Shobha would say, "Why drag all these books from one room to another? You work here. I'll sleep in the drawing room."

Manu went into the kitchen. He lifted the lids to find rice, dal, and curry, all laid on the table with care. A burnt *paratha* in the bin.

He went back to the drawing room and took out a thriller from the bookshelf on the wall. Turning its pages, he wondered, "What makes me come here? I swore never to come home before the summer vacation. So many boys don't go home during vacations; they would rather go somewhere on an excursion, or for training. But don't their families miss them? Don't they want to eat nice, home-cooked food and be fussed over?"

A pattern had established itself over the past three or four years, after he left school and went to college. A letter from Ma would unfailingly arrive within days of his reaching the hostel. She would write, "Home feels so empty now, as if it is haunted. I spend the evenings in friends' homes and return late. I rarely cook and make do with meals in the office canteen or

in the Marwari hotel. When you come home next, we will put together a nice meal of *biryani* and tomato chutney. I have bought a lovely little flower pot. You must get me a good sapling; we'll plant it."

The letter would make him feel as if someone's life had come to a stop for his sake. An awkward heaviness would overcome him. Ma, who was so full of life, so full of joy, seemed to have turned into a block of ice. She lived like a bird with its wings lopped off in that cramped two-room flat. For her, life would return only if he would come back.

The warm house of his childhood came often to Manu's mind, like a half-remembered dream. It had all vanished so suddenly, dissolved into nothingness overnight, as though a pitiless hand had flung off the blanket from his body on a freezing night. The frail boy had found himself engulfed in the dark bitter cold. The terror had not lasted long, though. Ma had gathered him into her arms, covered him with her sari end, and made him forget the secure comfort of the warm blanket. But it was also she who would shake him so rudely, telling him, "See what I am doing for you? I freeze myself to keep you warm. And you drop off to sleep as though it was nothing!"

When he would visit other households, they often prompted thoughts of his own inadequate home. The emptiness inside himself would make him reach out to them, wanting to be part of the cheerful bustle of their world—hankering to get close to whoever was near, seeking some simple warmth that his mother would never grant him. She would only ceaselessly remind him of his own drab, joyless home and punish him for running away from it.

In the days before he'd left for college, when he had had to stay up all night to prepare for his final school exams, Shobha would come into his room and fondly stroke his hair. "Study well, my son, work hard. Build your life with your own hands, and show them all what you can do." Manu, for his part, had dreamed of great results, of getting into a famous engineering college. And then a new life away from this stuffy two-room flat! No more of its thousand rules, no more lashings of his mother's words.

Then he would look around guiltily. The light would be on in the next room, and Shobha would be dozing, a book open before her. He knew she would not listen to him if he told her to go to sleep.

When at last his dream came true and the time came for him to go, he found the pain of leaving his mother and her busy, overburdened world unbearable. Guilt overwhelmed him. When she placed a consecrated flower behind his ear, he broke down and wept like a child.

“I won’t go away leaving you alone, Ma,” he had sobbed.

Shobha had managed a smile somehow and said, “Stupid boy! Look, how he cries! Such a grown-up fellow! Does one talk like this at such an auspicious time?”

In spite of all the newness of his college life in that distant city, he counted the days and came home before the Puja vacation began, combining the stray holidays of 15 August and Janmastami with the weekend to extend his stay. His unexpected arrival did not give Shobha a chance to wear her usual armour and, taking him in her arms, she broke into tears.

Within a day or two, however, the sweet warmth of home turned sour and suffocating. Manu felt desperate to get out into the open. It was not only his spending time with friends that his mother resisted. In that tiny two-room flat, he tripped over her words at every step. Her life was surrounded by a tangled skein that she could never unravel, so all her relationships got twisted and knotted up.



At her office, Shobha was known for hard work. Today, like all other days, she left behind the person within her, and the moment she shut the door and stepped onto the road, all she could feel was pity, even contempt, for that lonely self trapped there. She looked upon all the people swarming around her as mere empty shells with their selves locked up elsewhere.

Today in the office, preparations were afoot to organize a farewell party for a senior officer, Mr. Saxena. Each person was to donate fifty rupees. Shobha bluntly refused: “Why should I give fifty rupees? I never got on with that man.”

Her pencilled eyebrows dancing, Sudha Verma said sweetly, “Why dwell on these things now, madam? Shouldn’t we forget the past at a time like this? After all, Mr. Saxena is leaving us for good.”

Shobha replied curtly, "If the time to forget the past has arrived, why should I pay fifty rupees?"

Sudha stole a sidelong glance at her colleague as if to say, "I told you so, didn't I?" Now her colleague took it up, like a relay race, pleading, "Please give the matter a little thought, madam. There will be a party. We will all get together. There will be a feast and all of us will have fun. Why won't you come?"

Shobha fixed her eyes for a moment on that young know-it-all and said with clenched teeth, "I'm not going to come because this is no ordinary party. It is in honour of Saxena."

She heaved a sigh of relief when the two left her office. Why should she allow them to have it their way? You allow anyone to impose his will on you and he will exploit you. She had learnt by now that unless one had the courage to watch the smile on the other's face fade, one could never live one's own share of life.

She admitted to herself that lately fewer and fewer people had time to share with her. But she also knew well by now that people engrossed in their own worlds could spare little feeling for others. Anyway, did anyone really share the sorrows of others? Who didn't get a sense of relief the moment one uttered a word of sympathy at someone's distress? And why should she, who was no better than a criminal in the eyes of others for having broken the norms of accepted conduct, expect anybody to stand by her? One would presume she had sacrificed her right to happiness.

Only one person remained now in her world. It was Manu. That is the reason Shobha would relax all the hidebound rules and norms of conduct that she had so painstakingly framed for herself.

Would Manu take his food today? Would he go out to meet his friends against her wishes? Or would he stay back in the flat to study? The poor boy had come home for only a few days. What would he do all day in that cubbyhole of an empty flat?

She felt angry with herself, and guilty as well. Why should poor Manu be served up so much poverty, grief, and loneliness in life, which rightfully belonged to her? Having embarked on a life so full of possibilities, so laden with hope, Manu had been cruelly denied everything he deserved. If only that man had not walked out on her, whatever else might have happened, Manu would surely not have felt so small before his friends.



The pain of seeing her neat little home fall apart and the anguish of betrayal no longer hurt her. The memory of that man was also beginning to fade. Now, he was but another face in the crowd. The two of them had shared a life together for a while, showering all that they had on each other. Then came the fights—scratching and biting like two alley cats. Today, she felt it was all over and done with. Let him have his life, she should live hers.

But what of Manu? At least he could have had a better life. How unfair that with a broken home, he should also live in fear of what people said and in dread of tomorrow.

There were times when taking care of Manu and his future, all by herself, had seemed too much for her. More than once she had even written to that man, knowing all too well that he had started a new life with another woman. Shobha had written, "Whatever happened is past now. We have moved beyond love or enmity. We don't share our happy or sad moments anymore. But Manu belongs as much to you as to me. Can you disown him? Can you have the heart to deny him his rights and forget your responsibilities?"

She had felt ashamed after sending that letter. Yet she had waited for a reply. None came. Days became weeks, weeks months. She felt belittled, humiliated. Finally, she tried to find solace by telling herself, "In a way, what happened was good. Whatever God does is for the best. Who knows, if he had replied to my letter, re-established a relationship with his son, Manu might have gradually felt drawn toward his father. No, as long as I can, I'll do all I can for him. And no one except me will have any rights over him."

But Shobha's will soon failed her. Once, when she came down with a high fever, she sent Manu, with his satchel, to school with the maidservant so as not to let her pain shock him out of his child's world. She tossed in bed all alone and talked in a delirium. The maidservant brought her medicine and left milk, bread, and a glass of water by her pillow.

When her fever broke, she sat down to write a letter, her head still heavy from the sickness. She wrote, "Who knows, something may happen to me suddenly. Who will look after Manu if you won't? I don't for a moment suggest that you take him home. That is no longer possible. Manu, for his

part, may not like it. All I want from you is your word that you will take care of him until he is able to stand on his own feet.”

No reply came. It was as if she were carrying on a conversation with a dumb ghost. She reasoned with herself, “If he really had died and become a ghost by now, wouldn’t I be taking care of Manu? Aren’t there women, much younger than I, who shoulder heavier responsibilities? Because that man is still alive and is able to earn a living, I feel tempted to seek his help. Why can’t I simply forget about his existence?”

Eventually, the tender core of her being, which had survived so long, began to dry up and harden like a summer root. The experience had nothing to do with a feeling of pique born of love; it was simply an awareness of growing desiccated, of dying a slow death.

Friends like Rabi who, in those happier days, used to bustle into the house at any hour of the day, hailing her as sister-in-law and helping themselves to food in the kitchen, now gave her a perfunctory smile when they met and asked casually, “How are you getting on?” Once Shobha ran into Rabi, just outside her office. “You come to my office and go away without meeting me? Are you scared that I might ask you to do some work for me?” she asked him. Rabi said, looking down at his shoes, “No. No. It’s not like that.”

As if she did not want to let him off so lightly, Shobha persisted. “All right then. Let’s go to the canteen and have coffee.”

Rabi cast anxious glances at the passersby and said, “Some other day, sister-in-law, and not coffee at the canteen. I’ll come to your place and have a full meal.”

Friends, old and new, would still come to her house, but it was not quite the same. Some friends had drifted away. Others tried to get closer, but there was always something strained, almost brittle, about that closeness. At her moment of need, none of her friends ever said, “Don’t worry, I am with you.” She would get a sermon instead: “Shobha, you have to be strong and fight the world!”

Those relationships only made her life more complicated, more difficult. In the days before that man left, she could nod at her neighbours on the staircase; she could approach them if she needed change for a hundred-rupee note, or a thermometer. But these days, they behaved as

if they had never known her. And Manu's small sad face, she noticed, was beginning to look even more troubled and restless.

In the past, friends like Mrs. Ray used to invite her over whenever she tried out a new recipe. But these days, if Shobha called on her, she would hastily offer her a cup of tea and say, "We have to go to so-and-so's house." And if Shobha talked with Mr. Ray, his wife would watch the face of one and then the other.

Human nature, which had once seemed like a rich, verdant expanse, now looked arid and fissured.

Of course, as the years went by, so many things became clearer with distance, like a riddle getting solved. Shobha no longer felt that unbearable anguish. She even brought herself to forgive all her friends and neighbours, to some extent.

In the beginning, she had taken every care not to let his father come near Manu. This was not merely for fear of losing Manu but also to deny that man, if possible, any kind of happiness. For the relationship did not end with the divorce: a blazing thread of jealousy, hate, and anger had bound her to him for a long time. Now Shobha often wondered if that fire had destroyed the bond that linked Manu to his father.

This should never have happened. Something went wrong somewhere. Manu had suffered a lot and lost so much. Was she to blame for this?

When Manu was a child, she had made a point of talking about the good qualities of his father, about happier times they had spent together, so as not to let Manu grow up believing that his father was a devil. The man was a stranger now. Why rake up the ashes of love and hate? Only Manu mattered to her now. Let that man fade out of her life.

But could that really happen? Manu was quickly growing tall, looking like a man. A look-alike of his father. He no longer obeyed her—he had started thinking on his own, acting as he pleased.

One day, Manu opened the newspaper and exclaimed, "Have you seen this photograph, Ma?"

Of course, Shobha had seen it, but she was so flustered, she could not show it to Manu. She did want him to see it and know that he was the son of no ordinary man. Now, seeing Manu's bright excited face, the familiar seething anger engulfed her. She asked coldly, "Whose photograph?"

Manu gulped and lowered his eyes. "Papa's," he said. But his face did not betray any sign of shame or awkwardness, even for the benefit of his mother.

Shobha clenched her teeth and pretended to be busy with her work and not to have heard him. But while serving rice to Manu, her self-control gave way and she remarked acidly, "I see you remember your father very often these days."

Thoroughly discomfited, Manu tried to explain. "I just asked because I saw the photo. His name is printed below."

"When did I say you should not? What's wrong in feeling proud of one's father?"

Manu went on eating in silence. Shobha repeated what she had said on so many occasions. "I do want you to regard him as your father. I also want him to accept you as his son. Just because he and I now mean nothing to each other, his own blood should not become a stranger to him."

Manu did not say anything. Shobha continued: "In fact, when you grow up, you should demand that he recognize you as his son. I'll feel happy if you do so."

Shobha watched her son's face. It gave nothing away. What is passing through his mind? Is he hiding something from me? She asked, "Why don't you eat? You told me that it has been ages since you had potato-*postak* fries. Listen. There's something I haven't told you. I did write to your father several times, for your sake. Years ago, when I came down with typhoid and thought I was going to die, I wrote asking him just to drop me a line assuring me that he'd look after you in the event of my death. He didn't even bother to reply."

She noticed how Manu winced, as if he had received a stinging slap. The face that had glowed with excitement a few moments ago now had a stricken look, bent over the plate of food. Why had she said all this? Something wrung her heart.

A feeling of guilt kept troubling her for days afterward. One day, trying to sound casual, she suggested to Manu, "My dear boy, you are grown up now. Shouldn't you go and see your father in his office on your own? He won't throw you out if he recognizes you!"

Manu looked at her as if he could not believe his ears. Then he burst out, "What are you saying, Ma? That I go on my own, uninvited? Are you out of your mind?"

"It's not that, Manu. He is human after all. We lived together as man and wife, set up a home together. You played on his lap, he looked after you in those days. You were so little at the time—you'll hardly remember anything now. He would take you for a ride on his scooter, rock you on a swing in the park, hold you in his lap. You know, he would feed you ice cream and lick away the drips from your lips. When you were ill with pneumonia . . ."

"Stop it, Ma, please. I don't want to listen to all this. Don't people get attached even to pets and fuss over them?"

"Don't say that, my son. You don't remember those days, but I do!"

"How is it that he forgot all that? Has he ever bothered about me?"

Shobha wanted to say, "Yes, he did," but the words would not pass her lips; she swallowed them, turned her face away so as not to get caught. How could she confess that his father had not only inquired about him, but that he had tried all sorts of tricks to take him away from her? How he had begged her to let him hold Manu in his arms for a while! In those days, Manu was no longer a link that held them together; he had turned into a sharp dagger that could be used by one to hurt the other. But these things were best forgotten. Why should Manu know about them? All her suffering, her sacrifice, would come to nothing then.

Manu must grow up and settle down. All her worries would be over then. Her days would be relaxed again. But these very thoughts brought a feeling of emptiness with them, and a sort of fear—her fear and worry that Manu was now growing up to be a man.



On returning home from her office, Shobha heaved a sigh of relief when she saw the moped leaning against the wall. Inside, Manu lay fast asleep, a book lying open beside his pillow. Near him were two empty teacups and a little bowl containing a few peanuts.

Shobha did not want anything to shatter the serene joy of this moment. She tiptoed into the house, changed quietly, and went into the bathroom to wash. On her way home, she had picked up samosas and *jalebis* from a sweets shop. She arranged them on a plate and brought it to Manu's room. He still lay asleep—was that a faint smile on his face? Maybe he was somewhere having fun with his friends.

With a deep sigh, she thought to herself, "Don't I know he can't be placed under restrictions anymore! Why am I being so foolish? Not just foolish—in Manu's eyes, I'm no better than a harridan!"

When Manu was home during his last vacation, at one such moment of fulfillment, Shobha had told him, "I'm going to ask you to do something for me. Swear that you'll do it."

His attention divided between a magazine and some sweets, Manu had replied from his chair, "Okay, I will."

Flustered, Shobha said haltingly, "If he ever comes to claim you as his own, please don't say no to him. It will only do you good, believe me. And I will be able to live in peace."

Manu raised his eyes for a moment to look at his mother and then just smiled, as if amused. The matter had ended there.

His response had bothered Shobha for days, and it showed through her gestures and words. On some pretext or other, Manu had left for his hostel long before the vacation was over.

Shobha called out, "It's already dark, and you are sleeping! You'll fall ill." Manu opened his eyes, stretched himself, and cheered up when he saw the snacks on the table. Without a word, he stuffed a samosa into his mouth.

Shobha scolded him in mock anger. "Tut, tut, eating before washing your face and hands? Now where are you off to?"

Manu turned around and replied, "You eat, I'll get the tea."

Shobha settled into a chair and stretched out her legs on the bed. Breathing in the air from the ceiling fan, she told herself, "I'll make him go out after he finishes eating. Why should he spend the whole day cooped up inside the house?"

From the kitchen, Manu asked, "Did you take a lunch box today, Ma, or did you manage with *dosas* from the canteen?"

Shobha only laughed a little. Manu brought in the tea on a tray and asked, "Have you seen how I have rearranged the drawing room?"

Shobha laughed again.

Manu handed her the teacup and announced, "I'll pack my things after this. I have to go tomorrow."

"Where?" Shobha asked, somewhat stunned.

Sipping his tea, Manu said casually, "To the hostel. Where else? Manoj came here today. He said he had called the college and learnt that the strike has been called off."

Shobha looked hard at his face, which seemed half-buried in the teacup. Then she said in a thick voice, "Fine. Go, if you want to."

Manu lifted his face and gazed at the front door as if he was measuring its dimensions. Then he said, "I am not going because I want to, Ma. I've got to go. My classes begin tomorrow."

"That's fine. I said you could go. Who is stopping you?"

Manu slowly shifted his gaze to her face. She seemed to be busy examining the paint on the wall and did not seem interested in interrogating him. Manu said, "I'll miss my classes if I don't leave tomorrow. The semester examination is less than a month away. I'll do badly if I don't go now."

Shobha knitted her eyebrows. "All right. There is no need to shout. No one is stopping you."

"You think I'm leaving home on a false pretext. I know that's what you think. All right, then. I won't go tomorrow."

Shobha picked up the empty cups and said, "What difference does it make whether you are home or not? I have so much work to do, I get no rest at all. You just give me a headache. I have come home after a tiring day at the office. Let me have a rest. You may go wherever you like."

Manu promptly went out, riding his moped. Shobha closed the front door behind him. Turning back, she noticed that the divan had been rearranged. The new bedcover, which she and Manu had bought at the emporium, now lay spread over it. The picture on the wall, the images in the niche, had all been arranged in a new order; they all looked polished and dusted. Shobha sat down on the divan and pressed her face against her palms, holding her sari end. Fate is playing a mean trick on me, she thought. Again and again that man is trying to scare me from

inside Manu's looks. He is trying to plant in my future an image of a beautiful past whose ruins I remember.

It was eight o'clock when Manu came back home. Shobha opened the door to let him in; then she went back to her cooking in the kitchen. Manu followed her, humming a tune, and rummaged in the fridge. He took out a few cucumbers and tomatoes and chopped them to make a salad. Then he said, "Manoj promised he'd phone again to get more information. But he was not home when I went to see him. Must have gone somewhere."

Shobha said nothing. Manu garnished the salad with a green chili and some coriander leaves and covered it with a plate. He wondered what he should do next. He wanted to spend these few hours before his departure free of conflict with his mother. Unable to decide what to do, he went to his study table.

After a while, Shobha came in. Patting his back, she said, "Come, let's eat."

Manu got up, looking nervously at her face. She looked so small, and her face was engraved with lines. Her eyes looked swollen and red. She looked at his face, a foot above hers. Hers was not the face of a self-assured mother; it could have been the beseeching face of a child.

Manu wanted to find a way of apologizing to her, but before he could say anything, she entreated him, "Forget what I said, Manu. Please don't hold it against me."

To Manu, the woman who took his hand and led him past two small rooms into the kitchen was both a frightened little girl and a middle-aged woman carrying on her frail shoulders the burden of a thousand worries.

While she was serving the food, Manu said apologetically, "I'm sorry, Ma. Believe me, I really went out to meet Manoj."

Shobha sounded relaxed, "I could not prepare any sweet snacks for you—there was no sugar left. I'll make you some savoury snacks instead to carry back to your hostel."

The food got stuck in Manu's throat. He realized that his apology had been cut off.

"Have your clothes been ironed? Two pairs of trousers are still to be pressed."

"I'll do it. Don't worry."

"You have eaten nothing, Manu. Have a little rice pudding."



"I don't feel hungry at all."

"You slept during the day, that's why. You are leaving tomorrow—you should have gone out to meet your friends."

Manu scrutinized his mother's face, trying to figure out whether her words were barbed.

After her work in the kitchen was done, Shobha came and sat in the drawing room, with a steaming cup of coffee. She picked up a magazine from the side table, dropped it, and called out, "Manu, have you gone to bed or are you packing your suitcase?"

"No, Ma. I only brought a bag. I'm doing a bit of reading."

"You are leaving tomorrow. Come, let's sit and talk a while."

Manu replied after a brief pause, "Let me read for an hour, Ma. I haven't touched a book for the last four days."

"You will work hard at your studies when you are back at the hostel. Come to me, my darling. Are you still cross with me?"

Manu got up, heaving a sigh. The day he had arrived home, he had promised to himself that he would finish these two chapters. He had not been able to finish even one.

Yawning, he sat down beside her on the sofa and said with a smile, "You are drinking coffee. You'll soon complain you're not getting any sleep."

Shobha had washed her face with soap and tied her hair into a tight bun. Her face looked fresh, like that of a ten-year-old.

She said, "Manu, my dear, I had a talk with Mr. Kachru about you. He has promised to get you a good job if you can secure a first. The job has good prospects."

Confused, Manu ran his fingers through his hair and said, "Let me first finish my studies, Ma. The course is very demanding."

"I am sure you will do well, my boy. You have no reason to worry. If you can't do it, who can? I know you can do anything you want."

These words sparked a secret resentment in Manu's heart. How effortlessly, in those few words, had she transferred the burden from her shoulders to his! He looked at her. She sat there hugging her knees as if she was warming herself by a fire on a winter night.

But soon the glow of happiness on her face also spread to Manu's, without his awareness. He asked, "What job are you talking about?"

Among the many high-rise buildings of that lane, the light from just one flat remained on at that hour of the night. As the lights had gone out one after another, the small rectangles of darkness had grown larger and larger until whole buildings were engulfed by the darkness. Only one square of light lingered on, and so many visions of happiness were forming within it.

Shobha said, "We can do without a vehicle. First we must buy a flat, don't you think?"

Manu smiled. He shook his head with mock gravity and asked playfully, "But our plan was to get a VCR first, wasn't it?"

Shobha said, "Because you're away, I thought of buying a VCR so that I could pass my time. If you stay with me we should first find a nice flat, on an instalment basis, somewhere."

Manu added, "Not just somewhere. It has to be in a good neighbourhood. You should have a large wardrobe in your bedroom, and big breezy windows overlooking green trees."

Shobha broke into laughter. Her shoulders shook as if the laughter was little balls in her throat. The barking of dogs, the watchman's whistle in the street below, nothing could reach her now.

"And your daughter-in-law will bring all the household articles. What do you say to that?"

"Naughty boy! You've started looking so far ahead? But the girl should be good-natured, that's all I pray God to grant us."

"What do you mean? You sound as if no good-natured girl will consent to marry me."

The smile on Shobha's face suddenly faded. "It's not that, my dear. I've no doubt that the three of us will live together happily. Do you think there would be any girl in the world who could get along with me?"

"How can you imagine a girl not liking you, Ma?"

"You're bluffing, Manu. Just like your father."

"Please, Ma. Don't say anything. Just listen to what I'm saying . . ."

The neglected cactus in the flowerpot on the windowsill had a tiny red blossom that day.

"I'll go on a pilgrimage after all my worries are over, Manu."

"Don't say 'pilgrimage.'"

"What do you mean?"

“Say that we will take a trip to some place. We’ll travel. Where do you want to go? Badrinath? Kedarnath?”

“That would be excellent.”

“But you would have to walk a lot, in the cold, on snow . . .”

Shobha smiled and said, yawning, “You always talk big, Manu, just like your . . .”

Her eyes became heavy although she tried hard to keep them open. The scenes shifted rapidly. Tall green trees reached toward the sky. Among them, a little girl danced away, her feet barely touching the ground.



## *A Writer's Alter Ego*

Binodini Patra

Translated by Snehaprava Das

**T**his time, it was a brief visit to a small town located some three hundred kilometres from Bhubaneswar. I had come here on urgent business. I had to return that night and did not have much time to spare on leisurely engagements. I stood on the pavement of the market street with a close friend of mine who happened to be distantly related to me, looking perfunctorily at the stationery shop on the other side of the street. There was quite a rush of customers in the shop at that hour.

Suddenly, my eyes caught sight of a man who stood with his back turned toward me. He was dressed in an elegant and expensive outfit. A lady stood near him, facing the counter, selecting from the items displayed before her. Even from the back, the couple looked quite familiar. Since I was a little pressed for time, I asked my companion to wait for me on the roadside and hurried toward the shop, squeezing my way through the crowd. The familiar-looking elderly couple was coming out of the shop as I was about to step inside. We faced each other, and I had a close look at them. What a happy surprise! "Preeti Apa and Naba Bhaina!" The words automatically burst out of me as I joined my palms together to greet them.

Preeti Apa and I had once taught in the same college. Despite the difference in our ages and in the subjects we taught, we were good friends. Her husband, a top-ranking officer in the administrative services, was

also very fond of me, not just because I was close to Preeti Apa but also because, like me, he was a writer. A common interest in literary pursuits had contributed to bringing us all together. The bond of affection that tied me to Preeti Apa and Naba Bhaina was, I felt, stronger than the tie that binds people related by blood.

Both of them were delighted at this unexpected meeting. "What brings someone like you, from the capital city, to a town in a tribal area?"

"It is the sole privilege of administrative officials to enjoy the greenery and the innocent, flawless beauty of the people here, I suppose?" I retorted good-humouredly. "Others can't have a share in it?"

Naba Bhaina smiled appreciatively. "Quick-witted as always, aren't you! I know that no one can counter a remark the way you do. Yours is a special style, be it in speech or in writing."

With a shy smile, I changed the topic and turned to face Preeti Apa.

I always greeted them with similar effusiveness, but at that particular meeting, there was something more. The greeting was blended with a sense of thankfulness that made it even more cordial. I had asked Naba Bhaina for a favour a few months back. I had, however, made the request on behalf of a friend who was more than a younger sister to me. She was the same friend whom I had left waiting on the roadside when I went across to the shop to meet Preeti Apa and her husband. For a man with his clout, the job was child's play.

It all happened like this.

A few months back, the poor lady, a primary school teacher by profession, was transferred to a school for tribal people in the city in which I live and work. But before she had completed a year here, she received notice that she was going to be transferred to another school, this one located in a remote rural area. Her husband had been posted to another town, but she was living here with her three small children—one daughter of five, another of three, and a son, who was the youngest. The boy suffered from a malady that kept him confined to bed. He was in constant need of nursing and care. My friend was aware that living in this town meant paying more house rent and spending more on routine requirements. It was a big challenge to run the household and to provide the medical aid her son needed with the meagre salary of a schoolteacher. But she was brave and efficient, and a mother above all. The well-being of her

children is a mother's first priority. No mother would, at any cost, choose to compromise the health and happiness of her children. She knew that in the rural area to which she was being transferred, her son wouldn't get the medical care that he got here. So, despite all the disadvantages, she preferred to stay here.

The transfer order had left her in a state.

Shortly after she came to know about her transfer to that distant place, I went to the college on some official work and ran into Preeti Apa. She embraced me fondly and, without asking what had brought me there, said, "Do you know, Papa's wife has given birth to a son!" Her face shone with joy and excitement as she spoke.

Papa, Preeti Apa's son, had been my student just a few years back. That boy, Papa! Now a father!! I was amazed. With what great speed time gallops on, always carrying fresh riders on its back! And old ones like us are left behind, dismissed from the race of life.

"Try to find time to come and see Papa's son. He's a very pretty baby," Preeti Apa said. Her genuine request made me realize how small my heart was to hold such great love. "Sure," I replied, smiling happily, "I shall try my best. It all depends upon how much time the job takes today."

The bell rang. Preeti Apa had a class. She once more reminded me about making a visit to their place. She smiled her usual sweet smile and took leave of me. I stood there for a while looking after her, admiring her modesty. She was the wife of a top-cadre administrative officer. She had everything a woman could ask for. Life had gifted her with the luxury and lavish lifestyle that very few people can even dream of having, but there was not the slightest trace of snobbishness or arrogance in her character. The unalloyed affection she showered on me always made me feel as if I were one of the family.

I was free by early afternoon. I knew that neither Preeti Apa nor her husband would be home at that hour, so I postponed the plan of visiting them until evening. Since I had some free hours on my hands, I decided to meet this young friend of mine, who lived within walking distance of the college. She received me with a welcoming smile, but there was no life in it. I could sense that she was in a disturbed state of mind. Something had drained all the liveliness out of her. When I asked about it, she told me about her transfer to the school in a far-off village. "It is not even a year

since I joined this school. This order came just when I was about to settle here. There are no good doctors in that jungle area. I won't find medical facilities for my son. How can I take proper care of this boy in a place like that? This transfer is going to cause me serious trouble," she said with desperation in her voice.

The note of despair upset me terribly. "Another transfer? So soon?" It was as if I were asking myself the question.

"You know how it is, don't you? You have a job, too. But of course, yours is one of the superior kind. Those like me in lower-paying jobs are destined to live through such ordeals. Particularly the ones who do not have access to the people at the top—they suffer the worst."

"What does that mean?"

"I mean contact or close association with high officials in the government. I am telling you that this transfer is done only with an intention to make money. Why in the name of God should I be transferred when no substitute is posted here? You know, my father is a schoolteacher, as is my father-in-law. My husband and I are both teachers, too. An ideal teacher's job is to set a good example. Society will collapse if a teacher commits the dishonest act of bribing somebody. I cannot do that. It is against my principles."

I knew my friend well. She could be extremely stubborn when it came to principles. I had to work out an effective compromise that would best suit the situation. "Who is the officer dealing with this case?" I asked after a moment. She told me. I was overjoyed when I heard the name. The officer was none other than Naba Bhaina. It was he who would decide her fate.

"Stop worrying," I reassured her. "Your problem will be taken care of, be sure of that. Tell me who now has the transfer file."

"Just him," she replied, her voice rising with hope. "I went with my son to meet the collector and explained my difficulties. The collector asked him to look into the matter, but nothing has happened yet. I'm afraid there is something phony about the whole business. Maybe the collector too is a party to it." She paused a little, and then asked, "Isn't he a writer? You, too, are a writer of repute. He may oblige you if you make a request to him. I feel that I have been a victim of grave injustice. Don't writers in all ages speak out against injustice? Don't they strive to uphold truth? I don't think your dignity would be diminished if you were to advocate a



little in my favour, nor would it hinder his pursuit of truth if he makes an effort to help me.”

She is right, I thought, as I listened to her argument. It is a fact that writers, in all ages, have protested against injustice. It was they who established truth and made justice triumph over wrong. Great writers of the past like Tolstoy, Gorky, Premchand, Fakir Mohan, and many others have endeavoured to explore the depth of a human thought and build a well-regulated society, a society founded on noble values. Many of them succeeded in their efforts, too. Aren't the writers of today the worshippers of truth like those of the past? I asked myself. If writers are the true progeny of such great characters, I reasoned, Naba Bhaina must have that spirit of truth and sympathy in him.

Before I met this young friend of mine that day, I was of two minds about whether to postpone my visit to Preeti Apa's house to some other time. But the trauma my friend was going through settled the matter. Sharing your sorrows with a sympathetic soul always comes as a great relief. It often helps you discover new solutions to your problem. I decided to give it a try.

“Come with me to Preeti Apa's house this evening. I shall introduce you to Naba Bhaina,” I suggested. She agreed readily.

Leaving her son in the care of the housemaid, we left for their house at about half past five. On our way, we bought an expensive toy for Preeti Apa's grandson. The weather was not very cheerful. The slightly cool wind of late November caressed us.

High-profile people have a special procedure for receiving visitors. A dog started to bark uncontrollably as we entered, as if it had smelled a thief. Somehow, we reached the door and pressed the bell. A man opened the door and looked at us questioningly. We gave him our names and he went inside, leaving us standing at the door. He returned after some time and invited us to come in. We followed him to a well-furnished drawing room. Naba Bhaina came into the room, his face lit with a friendly smile, and welcomed me affectionately. With what seemed to be sincere interest, he asked how I was doing and so on. But none of this bonhomie, I observed, was addressed to the young friend who sat near me. Naba Bhaina did not even glance at her, as if it would disgrace his status if he inquired about the well-being of someone he didn't know.

I felt ill at ease and was unable to decide how to broach the subject. Something inside tugged at me, keeping me from speaking out about the problem that had brought me there. How can I steer my selfish motive through the surging tides of such unblemished love? I asked myself. Preeti Apa was somewhere else in the house.

I introduced my friend to Naba Bhaina. "She is a close friend of mine," I said. "She teaches here in a school. She has an appeal to set before you." In the dim glow of that cool twilight of late November, I could easily see the sudden change that came over Naba Bhaina. The smile fell away, and he slipped into the shell of an administrative official. The cold, hard look on his face transformed his personality.

"What kind of a woman are you?" he asked grudgingly. "Didn't you complain to the collector himself against me? Why have you come to me now?"

The rudeness with which the words were said hit me with an unbelievable force. I felt my feet sliding off the last step of the castle of imagination in which I had been wandering. The terrible impact shook my confidence, my enthusiasm, and the strength of my commitment. The remark insulted my friend and cast a dark shadow over my smile like a thick blanket of black clouds shrouding the golden morning sun. I was no longer interested in meeting Preeti Apa or Papa's son. Not allowing the urgency of my need to destroy my self-esteem as a writer, I briefly apprised Naba Bhaina of my friend's case and the genuineness of her difficulties and asked him to look into the matter—favourably, if possible.

As I stood up to leave, Preeti Apa entered, smiling sweetly. She took us into the dining room. We were served delicious snacks and tea. Preeti Apa talked amiably, but I couldn't respond in kind. At last, it was time to say goodbye. Preeti Apa walked out to the gate to see us off. The driver could have dropped us at our place, she said regretfully, but the car was not there. Before leaving, I asked her to put in a word to Naba Bhaina on my behalf to help my friend.

It had been a long time since I had visited Preeti Apa and her husband on that late November evening—six or seven months, perhaps. I had not had a chance to meet them or talk to them in all these months. Nor was I able to maintain contact with my friend. Like everyone else, I was kept occupied with the task of handling the obstacles placed in the path

of life. Sometime back, someone had told me that her transfer had been cancelled. I was happy for her. The news swept away the bitter memory of that early winter evening and filled my heart with gratitude toward Naba Bhaina. In the end, his sensitive writer's heart had overcome the egocentricity of a man of power.

I had felt the incomparable love and cordiality they had showered upon me, but it was the genuineness of Naba Bhaina's writerly sentiments that deeply impressed me. I felt my head automatically lowering before him. The bond that holds writers together is stronger than even the ties of a blood relation, I admitted to myself. I prayed that all writers should be as liberal, open-hearted, and sensitive as Naba Bhaina. Let more and more writers like him make it to the highest levels of administration and transform the state into a utopia. Let them take it to that noble height where love and justice prevail. Since the day I learned about the cancellation of my friend's transfer order, I had been looking for an opportunity to meet Naba Bhaina and express my sincere thanks. This unexpected meeting multiplied my gratitude severalfold. I gazed at them in adoration, like a devotee gazing at the deity.

"Well, poet," Naba Bhaina remarked in jest as he always does, "are you alone here or with some sympathetic soulmate?"

"No, no," I replied, "my friend who accompanied me that day to your house is with me. Over there, on the other side of the road," I said, pointing to the place where she stood.

"Aye, look who's here," I called out to my friend. "Come and meet them." The deep sense of obligation filling my heart made me sound excited. She was standing there, looking in the opposite direction. Perhaps she couldn't hear me. She did not turn her face to look at us. I called her again, this time by name. She cast a sideways glance at us but showed no sign of moving. I was deeply embarrassed by her manners. I turned to look at the reaction of Naba Bhaina and Preeti Apa, but by that time, they were already inside the car. I ran up to the car and said, "Many thanks to you, Apa and Bhaina. I don't know if I can repay in my lifetime the debt I owe you." The engine had started. A feeble smile appeared on Preeti Apa's face. Naba Bhaina smiled at me too—a pale, lifeless smile. I knew that the discourteous behaviour of my friend had insulted them. Even I would not have tolerated such standoffishness.

My friend and I made the journey back home in uncomfortable silence.

"There is a limit to discourteousness," I spat out in utter disgust as soon as we reached home. "How could you be so ungrateful? You didn't even care to join your hands to greet them! Everyone is selfish these days. Who would care to help someone the way he did? He considered your difficulties sympathetically because he is a writer. But what was it that you gave him in return? It really is a shame, the way you behaved." She listened to my accusations quietly. It was only when I finally stopped that she began explaining things to me. I was taken by surprise when I heard a nonliterary person like her philosophizing about the harsh realities of life.

"Who did you want me to pay my respects to—a man who is no less than a thief, a dissembler, a *Mafioso*, or a cheap broker masquerading as a writer?" she asked scornfully and, without waiting for my reply or reaction, went into the house.

She returned after a while carrying two cups of tea. She held out a cup to me, pulled a chair over, and sat down facing me. "Can you acknowledge everyone who writes a poem or a story as a true writer?" she began. "Anyone with money, power, and a high social status can merely cluster words together and claim to be a man of literature. Literature has become one of those products that are manufactured overnight in a machine, advertised and promoted lavishly, and marketed with a huge profit margin. You know that literary exercise has a twofold gold-plating effect on the personality of a writer. It fetches him both fame and fortune. Who wouldn't want to be a writer if the take is so high?

"Administrators like your Naba Bhaina produce literature in the machine of power and position. It is another thing whether anyone reads or understands it. But these writers gain a lot. They are not only recognized as reputed writers of the state, but they sometimes achieve national and international acclaim. They are like the ones who worship the deities in temples, chanting unintelligible mantras but without even a grain of true devotion," she declared with contempt. "They are devoid of the noble sentiments that can change an ordinary man into a writer. These people are imposters who roam around wearing a second self."

I stared at her, intrigued. "How can you make such accusations? An intelligent person like you must not allow personal antagonism to bias your opinion against a particular sect," I pleaded.

Her tone was calm but bold as she replied. "How can somebody who is indifferent to the pain of a fellow human being and does not understand the universality of human sorrow be a writer? He who measures human values with the scale of social status and power is not fit to be called a man. How can he be regarded as a writer, when writers are elevated human beings? The administrator who looks with compassion upon another human being's troubles and does not hesitate to put humanitarian consideration before the policies of administration if the demand is just—he has the ingredients of a true writer in him. Writers like your Naba Bhaina profess themselves to be ardent practitioners of art and literature but wouldn't lift their pen to write a line to help someone in distress unless their pocket is warmed."

I could sense that something had hurt her deeply. Such pain and torment often give birth to a writer.

"Since when have you started thinking like a writer?" I asked in a conciliatory tone. "And why do you condemn Naba Bhaina in this manner?"

"I learned that an order directing me immediately to my new station was signed the day after you asked him to consider my case favourably. In utter panic, I called a distant relative of mine and told him about it. He assured me that things would be set right soon. He knew that I would never go back on my ideology and principles. So he didn't let me know how he did it. But my transfer order was cancelled. I got the news the next morning. I am sure that there must have been some underhanded transaction. Money can really perform miracles, can't it! I realized that day how selfishness could guide a man down the secret path of sin to his hell."

After this shocking revelation, I cursed myself for being a writer. Am I, too, wearing a second self? I wondered. Even though she hadn't said it openly, my friend must have formed a similar opinion of me. I searched for the fading image of the writer that, I once believed, dwelled somewhere inside me.



## *A Mother from Kalahandi*

Gayatri Sharaf

Translated by Sumanyu Satpathy

**T**hey hadn't seen, nor did they want to see, each other before their marriage. Only after the proposals were made and the parents had given their consent did they accept each other in heart, soul, and mind.

On the fourth night after their wedding, the night of consummation, they were alone together for the first time. After lifting her veil, Swapnesh looked intently at Amrita. He swooned over her beauty. The poet in him said, "I knew it—you are like the petals of a rose. Your smile is like the moon. You are the *amrita*, the nectar that your name implies. In fact, I fell in love with you the day I heard your name and will continue loving you throughout my life."

The room was filled with the fragrance of flowers, the echoes of sweet nothings spoken. Amrita lifted her eyes to look at Swapnesh, who had turned poet in this dreamy ambience, and said, "I, too, have loved you since I first heard your name, and I have woven my dreams around you, my Swapnesh, my lord of dreams. I am very sensitive, so please don't shatter those dreams. Don't ever betray me."

Usually, such honeyed talk ends with those sweet nights. The stark reality of life takes over, and dreams evaporate—life, where flowers bloom only alongside thorns. Only for the lucky few do dreams never shatter

and thorns never sting. The two walk the path of life together, hand in hand, like companions.

Amrita and Swapnesh seemed to be among those fortunate few. After the honeymoon, they did indeed face many hurdles, yet they never allowed them to affect their life adversely. The sweet fragrance of that first night was still with them, and they felt proud that the dreams they shared continued to swathe their lives in the perfume of flowers.

Amrita felt that they were a couple unlike others. There was no streak of suspicion or any feeling of misunderstanding between them. Neither of us is superior or inferior to the other, Amrita would think. Whatever there is in us to be admired, we admire, and whatever to be ignored, we ignore. Like a seed, these thoughts germinated in her mind to become a magnificent tree, full of leaves and flowers. The nectar in those flowers sweetened their lives at every moment.

Swapnesh was a bit fickle, a little undisciplined, with a carefree disposition. He was absent-minded to such an extent that he would look for his pen, which all the while would be in his pocket. He forgot to carry his important files when going to court but remembered Amrita's zodiac sign and birthday, as well as their wedding anniversary. On those special days, he would come home early with a bouquet of flowers as a gift, smiling like a naughty boy. Amrita, too, would smile. She also remembered his likes and dislikes, his wants and wishes. She eagerly waited for him to return every day and then talked to him softly and lovingly.

Swapnesh always had a soft spot for the poor and the helpless. Whenever any of them came for legal help, he gave it for free. Amrita admired him for this. But, at times, she was critical of his down-to-earth nature, which seemed to her almost too straightforward. He was a reputable man and was well established in society. She wished he would behave more like a person who had authority, power. But no, he was always the same—good old, open-hearted Swapnesh. Friends, relatives, colleagues, everyone seemed to like them both. Anyone who came into contact with them could tell that they were a truly happy couple. They were special—although, of course, they were not wholly without enemies. While many liked them, some envied them.

Ten years of their life together passed ever so swiftly, ever so happily. Yet, in spite of giving them all this happiness, life withheld something



from them. That something grew in Amrita like an insidious virus, to the point that it overshadowed almost everything else. Real happiness eluded her. However much she tried to get that something from life, it was denied to her, as if life was playing a game—a game of giving something one did not want and keeping back something one wanted so much. At times, she thought she had overcome that grief. But can any woman really overcome such a want? Because this one want creates the greatest of all great voids in a woman's life.

Yes, Amrita was childless. She always wanted a little Swapnesh, but this little Swapnesh never came into her life. Medical reports made it clear that she would never become a mother. She cried her heart out that day, resting her head on Swapnesh's chest. He wiped away her tears with his lips. "Everyone has some grief, some want. One has to live with it. One has to bear the joys and sorrows of life, Amrita. The rules of fate are very strange. She who wants a child remains barren, yet she who doesn't has many children. Many unwanted children are born on this earth. They have neither the warm cozy laps of mothers nor the strong hands of fathers to comfort them. These orphans look for some shelter, and that's how orphanages have come to exist. In our city, too, there is one. It's called Ashray. Would you like to go there? If you want to do something for them, they would need you, love you, and call you Mommy," said Swapnesh.

Amrita kept quiet. Swapnesh thought that maybe she wasn't interested. But she went. When she looked at them, something in the faces of these poor, helpless children made her feel suffocated. She was about to go back home when a tiny girl came and stood in front of her. Holding Amrita's hands, she said, "Whoever comes here goes back never to come again, but please do not go away. We don't have anyone . . ." Amrita couldn't go back; she went to the market and bought fruit, bread, and biscuits for the children. She distributed these things with her own hands. After a few days, she went again.

Amrita's regular visits slowly but steadily pulled her closer to the children in a bond of love. She gave them not only fruit and biscuits but also her love and affection—she became a mother to them. Only then did she feel that she had overcome that want of hers. No longer was she the dried-up parched land, but a fertile one with an incessant rain of love pouring over her. She became acquainted with other social organizations

and began spending more and more time outside the boundaries of her home. She shared the happiness as well as the grief of others. Rumours began to spread that Amrita was going to join politics and run in the elections and that this was only the first round of preparation.

But Amrita knew that it was not politics but a principle that she had adopted. Swapnesh was always at her side, encouraging her. A few years passed like this for Amrita and Swapnesh, both losing themselves in the work of weaving dreams. But in spite of their busy schedule, their love and trust for each other always remained, making their home a happy one.

One fine morning, Swapnesh got up early and went out to his car, telling Amrita that he would be away for three days. "Do have your meals on time, go to bed on time, and take care of yourself," said Amrita, with wifely concern. "Remember what happened to you after your return from Kalahandi? If it happens again, I won't allow you to go out any more."

Swapnesh promised to take care of himself. "You, too—promise to stay indoors all three days, read books, watch TV, and listen to Ghulam Ali's love songs," he said before leaving.

Amrita suddenly realized that she had not read any books or listened to any music lately. After Swapnesh left, she did decide to spend all three days indoors. She would spend the whole time on herself alone. In the afternoon, when she was watching TV, a telephone call came from Ashray. The girl who had been brought to the orphanage only a few days ago had suddenly fallen ill. Amrita felt a little irritated and said, "I'm also not feeling all that well. So please ring up the orphanage doctor. He can come and see the girl."

But after saying this, she began to feel restless. The face of that little girl danced in front of her eyes again and again. She asked for an auto-rickshaw and went straight to Ashray. On her way home, she suddenly got a jolt when their car drove past her auto-rickshaw. She could not believe her eyes. Is it Swapnesh? she asked herself. She could be wrong about the car, but she could never make a mistake about Swapnesh. Had he not gone away? Or had he come back? Reaching home, she inquired and found out that Swapnesh had not returned. She became worried and restless. Neither book nor cassette could take her mind off Swapnesh. A host of doubts assailed her.

Swapnesh returned on the third day. The moment he arrived, as was his wont, he took her into his arms. She freed herself and looked intently at him. It was the same Swapnesh whom she had seen that day. She felt like asking but held back. Approaching her forties as she was, her eyes could have deceived her. She thought of this and kept herself under control.

Again one day, Swapnesh said, "Look, I have an important appointment today. So I've got to leave early."

"The workload has increased for you as well as for me. But how long can we go on like this? We have done enough work, enough social services. Now we should live only for ourselves. I should devote all of my time to you and you to me," replied Amrita, as she prepared some tea.

"All right, all right, as you please, but I do have to go early today," said Swapnesh.

He finished his tea and went to the portico to start the car. "I'll be having my lunch out; so you should have yours at the regular time," he said, starting the car.

No more of this. I'll keep you close to me, let the world think what it likes to, she told herself. After lunch, she got ready to go to Ashray. That day, a Gujarati couple was to come to adopt a girl child. People would come to adopt these homeless and helpless children, and this was a tremendous thing. Amrita was lost in such thoughts. Suddenly, the rickshaw stopped. Her thoughts were disrupted. The rickshaw puller fixed the chain, which had come off, and wiped the sweat off his body with a towel before starting to pull the rickshaw again.

"Stop, please, stop." The rickshaw puller was a little taken aback and looked questioningly at her. At that moment, her eyes were fixed on a distant scene. It was like the scene of an earthquake. Was it real or a dream? No, the sun was still shining, so it could not be a dream. Her eyes were wide open. She saw Swapnesh and another woman walking together after getting out of the car. They entered a house and closed the door. *Look, I have an important appointment today. So I've got to leave early.* These words were ringing in her ears.

She wanted to run to him and ask, "Whose house is this? Who is this woman? Why have you come here?" But she could not utter any of these words. Instead, she asked the man to go faster as she was getting late. She entrusted the little girl to the Gujarati couple, crying hard all the while.

She slept that night with a fire raging in her heart. Swapnesh returned late. He wanted to sleep holding her tight, but she moved a little away, not allowing him to touch her. Whatever he asked, she answered with a yes or a no. She pretended to sleep, but sleep was miles away from her. The whole night, she tried to find out the truth, but in vain.

The next morning, after Swapnesh had gone to court, she went to that same house with a thudding heart to get her answers. She knocked at the door. The one who opened the door was not the same woman whom she had seen the day before. This was a girl, about seventeen or eighteen. She had a certain freshness about her and her face resembled the full moon in the month of Chaitra. "What do you want?" asked the girl with inquisitive eyes.

What did she want from this tender-aged girl? For a moment, it seemed as if she had come to the wrong place. But no, it was the same place, the same house where she had seen Swapnesh the day before. But this fact she kept to herself. "I have come to take a survey, but suddenly I feel thirsty. Could you please give me some water to drink?" asked Amrita.

"Oh, of course, come inside and have a seat," the girl said and went to fetch a glass of water.

Looking at the girl once again, Amrita said, "You are really very beautiful. What's your name?"

The girl felt a little shy at this. Tying her hair into a bun, she replied, "I'm Kumari."

"Oh, what a beautiful name! Do you live here alone?"

"No, I have a daughter. She is asleep."

"Oh, you are married then . . . your husband?"

The girl giggled at the word "husband" and said, "I am not married. But I have a home and a child."

"How come?"

Suddenly her giggles stopped, and she looked sad.

"No, I can't tell you. Sir has asked me not to tell anybody. If I do that, he'll sell me in some place far away."

A shock ran through Amrita at this talk of selling. Holding Kumari's hand, she made her sit on the cot.

"You have given me water to quench my thirst. You seem to be having some problem. Why don't you tell me? I am like a mother to you. Who is he? Who would sell you?" asked Amrita.

Kumari stared at Amrita. Clearly, she had never heard such kind and loving words. Her eyes became moist. It seemed to her as if Amrita was indeed her mother and would not sell her. Leaning a little closer, she asked, "Have you heard the name of Kalahandi?"

"Yes, I have." The name Kalahandi bothered her a little.

"Mahul Gharana is a small village in the Kalahandi district. I belong to that village. The village was so called because at one time it was overgrown with *mahul* flowers. But there are no more of them. It is a dry, lifeless place now. Everywhere there is only hunger. Everybody is overcome by hunger. It is a dream to get a handful of rice. For days altogether, the hearth is without fire, so there is no question of the pots and pans getting burnt.

"Because of this hunger, many people left for Raipur. Many have died from eating wild plants that turned out to be poisonous, and many parents are forced to sell their offspring for paltry sums of money, only to survive a few more days. There is no more work, no labour, no help, and no hope for us.

"At a time like this, some gentlemen from the city came to our village. They held some meetings, took our photographs, and said that they would go and appeal to the government on our behalf. There was nothing to be cooked in our house or at anybody's house. My mother and we two sisters had only some forest potatoes and berries to eat.

"One of the gentlemen came to our house and took our photographs inside. My mother said, 'When will the government listen to our plight? That we do not know, but we know you, because you have come to us. If you listen to our problems, you become the government for us.' Then she showed him my seven-year-old sister and said, 'I would like to sell her. Are you interested in buying?'

"The man saw my sister and also me, standing by my mother. He looked at my body and said, 'Perhaps she is your eldest daughter. If you would sell her, I would buy her for three hundred rupees.'

"How much is that?' my mother inquired. The man made her understand the value of three hundred rupees by showing her how much flour and rice she could buy with that kind of money. At that time my mother was crying, holding my hand. She wiped away her tears when she understood the value and said to me, 'Go, go with him, Kumari, now that I have sold you to him.'

"I said, 'No, I don't want to go with him.'

"Then my mother said, 'Your best friend has also been bought by another gentleman. She is in the city now. She is getting two square meals every day. If you go too, you can also get rice to eat every day.'

"I fell into the trap. I thought that if I agreed, my mother and sister could survive for a few days. So I came with him. When I was sitting in the car, I asked whether I would get rice every day or not. Pressing my arms, the man said, 'If you listen to me, I'll give you rice and also mutton. Besides, I'll give you many other things.'

"What do I have to do?' I asked.

"Pulling me toward him, the man said, 'I'll take care of your hunger, and you take care of mine.'

"I said, 'Are you joking, sir? You people come from the city. How can you still be hungry?'

"You are grown up—how can you not understand that, like the hunger for food, there is another hunger, the hunger for flesh?'

"The way he was sitting, the way he was talking, I began to understand that there was this other hunger for flesh. Yet I said, 'What about your home, your wife?'

"Yes, I do have a wife, but she is not enough to satiate my hunger. That's the reason I bought you. I'll give you a place to stay in and also good food to eat.'

"Sir told me all these things. And he kept his word—I don't have any wants. But when I conceived this girl, he did not feel happy. He said, 'I don't want any complications, any problems. If you deliver this child, you will lose your figure, your beauty, so let's go to the doctor and abort this child.'

"But I didn't agree to this. I gave birth to this girl. He got annoyed and changed his behaviour toward me. After this incident, he no longer bothered about me. Yesterday, he brought another girl here. When I complained, he said, 'If you tell anyone, I'll sell you again somewhere far away. So you had better keep quiet.'"

Amrita was listening. She was staring at this girl, Kumari, unblinking. She had no words to utter. Finally, with great difficulty, she said, "What is his name, Kumari?"

"I don't know, but there is a photograph—do you want to see it? Yesterday, he forgot his purse. His photo is in there. Please come, come inside.

See my daughter and see her father also. Look, I tell you all this, thinking that you are so close to me. Please, do not tell this to anyone." Kumari stood up. Once again she invited Amrita inside. Amrita had no strength in her legs to go inside. Before her eyes, her trust of the past twenty years was going up in flames, leaving her world in darkness. Although she got up, she was thinking and hoping against hope: Let it be someone else's purse; let the photograph be someone else's.

Kumari handed over the money purse to her. She recognized it immediately and closed her eyes with a feeling of excruciating pain. But behind her closed eyes, she was seeing Swapnesh. Her mind was swimming in a pool of anguish; her body was burning with the fire of humiliation. Yet she was forced to keep quiet. Slowly, she opened her eyes, looked at the sleeping child, and turned her face away. Dragging her legs, she came out of the room and said, "I'm going, but I'll come back."

She did come back, but as a different person. Kumari was applying oil to the baby, who was giggling.

"Suppose he sells you elsewhere?" Amrita asked.

"I won't go. I'll report him to the police. And I'll appeal to the government."

"But if no one listens to you, not even the police and government?"

"You promised to do something."

"Yes, I'm thinking of sending you back to your village."

"Sir has bought me. Do you think he would allow it?"

"That's my problem. You have been sold, but that does not mean that your owner can make you his slave for life. You are free now . . . So please go away."

Kumari did not like this development. She lifted her baby and brought it close to her chest and looked thoughtful. After a moment's silence, she said, "Even if I go back to my village, I have to face the same fate—the hunger and going without food for days. Now I have this baby. She also would need food. Madam, please, give us a little shelter in your house. I'll do all the household chores for you."

Amrita felt uncomfortable. Turning her face away from Kumari, she said, "I already have too many servants in my house. So I really cannot keep you at my place. But why do you worry? I'll look after you, and all the responsibilities of your house are going to be mine, including your

mother and sister. Every month, I'll send you money. You have to go back, but before that, you have to give me something."

Setting her daughter on the cot, Kumari said, "What have I got to give you?"

"Yes, you do have something, you have a jewel. Can you give it to me?"

"Jewel?" What jewel did she have, wondered Kumari.

"I want your daughter."

"What will you do with my daughter?"

She could not reply. There was a jumble of thoughts in her mind.

"You haven't answered me," said Kumari.

"I—? I'll keep her with me, and I am not going to sell her to anyone."

This made Kumari feel at ease. She put a black dot on her daughter's cheek to ward off the evil eye, planted a kiss on the child's forehead, and handed her over to Amrita, saying: "Once my mother sold me, and today I'm selling off my daughter, with a heavy heart, to you. This is all for this stomach, and this hunger." Then she began to cry bitterly. The baby in Amrita's lap opened her eyes at the sound of her mother crying and looked at her. She caught hold of a piece of her sari in her little hands, as if to say: "I am not an orphan. I'll not go to an orphanage. Please take me home." Her touch, her look thrilled Amrita. A gust of wind from somewhere blew away all the smoke of any doubts that she felt. The love of a child and its mother was something that could not be betrayed.

In a voice full of authority, she said, "I'm taking your child to give her the rights she is entitled to. Just like any mother, the mother from Kalahandi bears the child in her womb, goes through the pain of labour, and feeds the baby with nectar from her body. Like their fellow Indians, the children from Kalahandi have the same right to love, food, and clothing. They are not born to be sold.

"I cannot satisfy the hunger of all the people of Kalahandi or cry my heart out over their misfortunes, but I can tell society about your woes. I can tell the government that selling children is not some sort of Kalahandi custom. I can ask them to crawl out of their cocoons and go to see the mothers of Kalahandi, in whose hearts the fountain of love is bursting forth, as in mothers everywhere. They sell their children not for the fun of it but out of hunger, to live, to survive for a few more days. They sell their young girls to men from the city just to provide themselves and their daughters with a few morsels of food."



Kumari was listening to all of this with awe. She could understand some of it, and much went over her head. But one thing she understood: she would be going back to her village, and there she would get a square meal each day. She started to pack her belongings. Amrita stepped out and called to a man standing near the gate. She told him to take Kumari back to her village. She also put some cash into Kumari's hands. The girl touched Amrita's feet, kissed the baby, and left. But, from time to time, she looked back.



## *The Sound of Silence*

Susmita Rath

Translated by Ashok K. Mohanty

**T**he doctor turned away from the patient he was examining. Lakshmi, the maidservant, was standing at the door of his consulting room. “Sir,” she said, “The mistress wants to talk to you when you finish your work. Some people have come to see you and are waiting in the living room.”

The doctor looked outside. There were no more patients. He said, “Ask her to come here. I’m almost done.” Dr. Patnaik was a well-known healer, specializing in psychiatric ailments. He did not treat someone as just another patient—he tried to peer into their hearts and experience their pain. His advice was reassuring for patients, and his gentle touch helped many return to light from darkness and despair. They learned to love life again.

He wondered about the visitors as he was explaining the dosage of the medicine he was giving to the patient. Perhaps they were acquaintances of his wife, Sujata.

The patient left. Two women, one older and one younger, entered the room, along with Sujata. Subala Babu followed them. Sujata and the older woman were holding the younger one by the hand as they came in. The girl looked very weak—she was not even able to walk properly. The doctor asked them to have her lie down on the examination table.

He did not recognize the two women, although he had known Subala Babu for a long time. He belonged to Sujata's village. The doctor had no idea whether he was related to Sujata in any way, but he was aware of the fact that relations meant very little to Subala Babu. He belonged to everyone in the village—a genuine social worker. But he was not the usual dhoti-and-kurta-clad social worker with whom we're all only too familiar. He had remained a bachelor and had no kin of his own. Yet everyone was close to him. He was constantly busy helping people out. If someone's daughter got married, Subala Babu would be looking after the cooking as well as the reception. Someone's son had been admitted to a college, but there was no money for the trip, nor was there anyone to accompany the boy to his college. No problem! Subala Babu was there! When someone died or a baby was born into a family, the presence of Subala Babu was mandatory. The doctor loved this altruistic, helpful person. Sometimes Subala Babu came to his house, and when they went to Sujata's village, they saw him there as well. The doctor smiled at the visitors and greeted them.

Sujata introduced the lady. "Don't you recognize Kuni Apa? She's the daughter of Vinay Uncle. You met her when we went to our village the last time." The doctor could not recall the occasion. He wasn't able to go to Sujata's village very often, and, when he did go, many people came to talk to him. It was difficult to remember anyone in particular.

Sujata realized that her husband wasn't able to place Kuni Apa. To jog his memory, she added, "Kuni Apa sent her daughter with jackfruit curry for you when you were at the village last time. Padma spilled the curry on you. Don't you remember?"

Now the doctor remembered. A thirteen- or fourteen-year-old girl had come running in with a bowl of curry in her hand, and he collided with her while coming down the stairs. The bowl dropped and half the curry fell on him. The other half fell on the ground. Terribly embarrassed, the girl began to wail. She had carried the bowl of curry sent by her mother for a guest . . . and it was gone. Mother would be terribly angry when she learned that she had spilled the curry on the son-in-law. Then she flushed and ran away. After a while, Kuni Apa had arrived with another bowl of curry. She had shouted at the embarrassed girl in front of him. The doctor smiled when he recalled the incident and said, "Yes, now I remember."

Sujata said, "And don't you recognize Padma? This is Padma, Kuni Apa's daughter. She is not well, and Kuni Apa has brought her to you."

The doctor looked at the young woman but could barely recognize her. The girl bore no resemblance to the doe-eyed, fair-skinned girl of that day, with her long braid of hair. She looked like a spectre. There was no smile, no sorrow, no expression on her face. She had turned dark and become thin as a pole. But it was apparent to him that she had married in the meantime. This was not the first time that the doctor had come across such a patient. They came to him every day. It was a case of severe depression.

He asked Padma's mother, "When did she get married?"

Kuni Apa drew the corner of her sari over her head as she said, "About two years ago."

The doctor then asked, "Your son-in-law hasn't accompanied you?"

As she wiped her eyes, Kuni Apa said, "That is the root of all the trouble. I have no idea what disease she is suffering from, but she starts vomiting the moment she sets eyes on him. She insists that he stinks like rotten fish. She can't bear the stench. How could the in-laws keep her in their house after listening to this kind of nonsense? The son-in-law has left her in our house. We've already consulted many doctors, but nothing has worked. Finally, Subala Babu advised us to consult you. He says that you have cured many such patients. Please do something for her; otherwise, she's not going to live much longer."

The doctor wrote Padma's name, age, and address on his prescription pad. Sujata left them in order to prepare lunch for her guests. In response to the doctor's questions, Kuni Apa started narrating Padma's story.

"Padma was given in marriage to Minaketan of the neighbouring village two years back. Minaketan taught in a school. We were happy, since he held a steady job. He was slightly past his prime—around thirty-two—but that's not important in the case of a man. However, there was a big difference in age between the bride and the groom. There was nothing that I could do, since I'm all alone. Padma doesn't have a father or a brother. And there were two more girls to be married off.

"So we went through with this marriage as soon as the proposal came. Padma, too, was happy. But then she contracted this disease all of a sudden. All kinds of unpleasant smells seemed to hit her nose. She vomited everything she ate. She became so weak that she couldn't even

move around. She was carrying at the time. We initially thought that she was throwing up because she was pregnant. Some pregnant women do smell strange odours. But she gave birth to a girl six months ago and still suffers from the same ailment. Some kind of weird smell will hit her all of a sudden and her head will start reeling. She can't eat anything. She isn't able to sleep for nights at a time. I have had her treated by several doctors, but to no avail."

The doctor turned to Padma and joked, "Padma, don't you have anything to throw at me this time?" Padma did not reply. A huge *baula* tree laden with flowers stood in the doctor's compound, and the courtyard was littered with its flowers. Their fragrance filled the air. "Can't you smell the fragrance, Padma?" Padma did not answer that question either. She continued to lie quietly as if no one was around. The doctor checked her blood pressure. He tried his best to start a conversation with her. But she was indifferent to everything and remained silent.

Her mother said, "She doesn't say anything. She just keeps quiet. Sometimes she will voluntarily talk about some stench or aroma. She says nothing apart from that. There's no point in trying to start a conversation with her."

Suddenly, angry voices could be heard from the main house. The doctor's attention was distracted. Minakshi, his only daughter, had perhaps started throwing tantrums yet again. She was always obstinate. She wanted all her demands to be fulfilled right away, or else she would start shouting at the top of her voice and create a scene. Her eyes would turn deep red and she would break anything she could lay her hands on. No one had been harsh with her when she was young. But she was a grown-up girl now, and Sujata often tried to put her foot down. So mother and daughter shouted at each other every now and then. The doctor wondered what had made Minakshi lose her temper today. There were guests in their home, and Sujata must be terribly embarrassed. The sound of a glass breaking could be heard. Everything was quiet after that. Maybe Sujata had dragged Minakshi after her into the bedroom. The doctor tried to ignore the incident.

He turned toward Padma again to ask more questions. He was surprised to find her having a coughing fit. She might vomit at any moment.

The doctor held out a glass of water to her. Padma had to make an effort to regain control over herself.

The doctor asked, "What happened, Padma? Why did you have the coughing fit all of a sudden?" Padma looked at the wall and seemed to be talking to herself: "Oh! Someone is burning red chilies! My nose, eyes, and chest are burning."

Padma's mother exclaimed, "Did you hear that, Subala Babu? This goes on all the time. Someone has perhaps cast a spell on her. We have tried to exorcise all the evil spirits within her, but in vain. Instead, she is getting worse by the day."

The doctor was intrigued. The smell of someone burning red chilies? No one else had smelled anything of the kind. Did Padma experience Minakshi's outburst as the smell of burnt red chilies? She'd had the coughing fit after listening to the angry voices from inside the house. Now she was back to her usual self.

The doctor looked at Subala Babu and said, "You need to tell me everything connected with her. How can I treat her otherwise?"

Padma's mother lowered her eyes. She again drew the sari end over her head and said, "I am not trying to hide anything. Why should I feel shy? We weren't able to make inquiries at the time of Padma's marriage. Later, we learned that the son-in-law had been having an affair with another girl, so he hadn't agreed to this proposal. His mother had coerced him into marrying Padma. The son-in-law wasn't happy with Padma right from the beginning. At first, Padma wasn't aware of anything. But she's a woman, after all. She could instinctively grasp the situation. She realized that her husband was keeping her at a distance.

"There was a change in her from that day. Gradually, she stopped smiling and became quiet. The illness started just after that. The son-in-law was always a hot-tempered person. He scolded her for the slightest lapse. He was like that from the beginning. All the same, Padma is his wife—he has never repudiated that. Besides, it is not as if there's anything wanting in their household. She doesn't realize that, as a woman, one has to bear everything quietly. She could be patient and stay there and take things in her stride. But why she should be afflicted by these smells I just don't know."

The doctor inquired about Padma's mother-in-law. "Did she look after Padma?"

Kuni Apa replied, "She was quite nice in the beginning. Padma did all the household work single-handedly when she was in good health. But Padma now says that her mother-in-law stinks like the insects that feed on cow dung. Wouldn't her mother-in-law react to something like that? I can't really blame her. She won't come near Padma anymore. She forced her son to marry Padma. She thought that her son would change after the marriage, but he didn't. And then Padma came down with this terrible illness. Who would want to have a daughter-in-law like that around?"

"Is there no one else at their home?"

Kuni Apa said, "Yes. The son-in-law has a sister. She's a nice girl. Padma and she are good friends. She looked after Padma when she fell ill. She served her and cajoled her to eat. She looked after her every need."

The doctor asked, "Doesn't she stink?"

"No, she doesn't. On the contrary, Padma says that she smells like the *champak* flower."

The doctor understood that all these strange smells arose from within Padma. Her subconscious wanted to push everyone away, using the smells as a pretext. She had probably never understood it consciously, but something inside her had sought out this path to keep her going. When she got married, she had stepped into a new world with great expectations. She thought that she was going to paint her house in the colours of her own imagination. But that dream shattered when reality hit her. The cruelty of the man of her dreams and the scandals associated with him darkened everything for her. She had stretched out her hand desperately as she found herself sinking into that dreamless pit. But no one grasped her hand. No one pulled her out of that darkness and led her toward light. Her own people told her that she had to make peace with her bleak future. She was forced to accept it, believing that that was her destiny. That was why her protest had taken such a strange shape.

The doctor explained, "You see, this is not a disease affecting the body. It has put down deep roots inside her mind. It cannot be cured by medicine alone. She wants to live, but she cannot figure out how. She can again live as Padma of the old days only if all of you help her to. Her life is like a



river and no one can stop the flow. The stream will find another course if it hits an obstacle. And you have another weapon with you—her daughter.”

Tears rolled down Padma’s cheeks. The doctor prescribed medicine for a month. He would examine her again after that time. Kuni Apa took her hand and led her into the house. Padma walked away like a wind-up doll.

Several months passed. The doctor was busy with his daily schedule and forgot all about Padma. Many such patients came to him. He listened to all kinds of stories from them. Padma’s story was but one of these.

One day, in the midst of a conversation, the thought of Padma suddenly crossed Sujata’s mind. Kuni Apa hadn’t come back after a month, as she was supposed to. How was the girl doing? She had meant to ask her brother about Padma when he telephoned. Then she got busy with her household work and forgot to telephone her brother. Then, even when he telephoned her, she forgot to ask after Padma.

Sometime later, Subala Babu again paid a visit. Sujata asked him about Padma the moment she saw him: “She should have come back after a month, but many months have gone by. How is she?”

Subala Babu smiled. He said, “If you’re asking about her health, then you must think she’s still a human being. But she’s a goddess now—a real one! She’s known as Mother Gandheswari. The newspapers went wild over her for a few days. It must have somehow escaped your notice.”

Sujata was amazed. What with his busy schedule, the doctor never had time to read that kind of nonsense in the newspapers. But Sujata enjoyed all kinds of weird news: a calf with three heads, gods surfacing from the bowels of the earth—many such tales were published every day in the newspapers. Sujata read them all with great interest, although she didn’t believe them. How could anyone believe such things in the modern world?

Subala Babu explained further: “Padma improved a bit after returning from this place. The Padma of the old days seemed to be peeping out from inside her at times. Then her husband arrived one day and took her away. We protested that she was under treatment and needed to stay with us longer, until she had recovered. But he’s a very obstinate person. Who could oppose him? Instead, he claimed that we were branding his wife as a madwoman out of malice toward him. He threw the medicines away.

What could poor Kuni do? She's a widow, after all. She had no choice in the matter when the son-in-law himself came to take Padma away.

"Later, we heard that Padma wasn't ill at all; rather, she had been possessed by a goddess. At first, Minaketan hadn't been able to understand this, but some holy man caught a glimpse of Goddess Bhabani inside her. Now word has spread that she is Goddess Gandheswari. Anyone who asks her a question receives an answer. Of course, all the answers come in the form of a smell or a fragrance. Ordinary people can't interpret the answer. Someone has a fragrance like a flower, someone like *tulsi*, someone like a lemon, or someone like a heap of manure. Her husband explains everything in simple language. People are thronging to their place. Reporters come to photograph her. Her husband is on leave and stays at home. They're making good money from this enterprise. Why have a job? He has already bought himself a motorcycle.

"Kuni, for her part, has chosen to keep quiet. Everyone is scared of interfering in matters involving gods—what if she really was possessed by some goddess? Padma is like my granddaughter. She grew up in front of me. So how do I now accept that she's a goddess? I went to see her the other day. She kept staring at me. I thought her eyes resembled the eyes of a dead person. It was a blank stare, absolutely devoid of emotion. I don't think she could see anything. I literally ran away from the place."

Sujata looked away. She said, "The mother should be happy if the daughter is being worshipped as a goddess. The son-in-law did not bother about the daughter earlier. Now he sits near her all the time. Kuni Apa must be very happy indeed!"

Subala Babu and the doctor said nothing.

That night, Sujata woke up from a dream with a start. She was covered with sweat. She felt that her chest would burst. What a terrible dream!

Padma was gradually sinking . . . very, very slowly. There were big and small whirlpools all around her, spreading in all directions. But the whirlpools weren't made of water. How could there be such whirlpools in space? Padma was not moving her limbs. She sank into empty space as Sujata watched. She vanished from sight. Many people stood silently and watched that scene unfold: Kuni Apa, Minaketan, Padma's mother-in-law, Sujata, Subala Babu, and others. But was *she* standing with the others in that dream?

What a strange dream! Her throat was parched. She poured herself a glass of water and drank it, wondering whether she would be able go back to sleep.



## *The Worn-Out Bird*

Aratibala Prusty

Translated by Chandramoni Narayanaswamy

**I**t 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

Spark of Light

in her sunken eyes became hazier. Everything was being washed away by a flood of tears—such a deluge, sweeping even God away.

## *A Kerchief of Sky*

Sanghamitra Mishra

Translated by Priyadarshi Patnaik

I created you. At that moment, the umbilical cord was cut. But now you are not a child, not even a young woman anymore. The scars of time have begun appearing on your face. You are an educated woman—just the other side of thirty. Are you sad because you didn't have a normal childhood? Think of Yajnaseni! That great lady, Draupadi, born of the sacrificial fire—did she ever have a childhood? She was the outcome of anger, humiliation, and the desire for revenge! Imagine that you are my Yajnaseni. For me, you are a ray of light—so let your name be Sikha. You are born to fulfill a specific objective. You aren't merely a ray of light—within your body are a thousand rays of light. Within every word, a spark of light, great physical energy.

Come, Sikha, let's now start by looking at you closely. You are a representative of our times. A woman of our times who has passed thirty. Let's see if we can find the vermilion mark of marriage on your forehead, in your parted hair! Yes, you are married. On your forehead, the vermilion spot. On your ankles, anklets; toe rings on your toes. Other ornaments on your body. A beautiful sari wrapped around you. You must have married into a wealthy family. The sari end that covers your head slips every once in a while. I take pleasure in looking at you—see how the creator turns into a child in front of the creation! On your face, a rain cloud. To make me

happy, you smiled a little and your face looked so very sad. Did I really create you as this dark desolate cloud? You used to talk about burning with force and vigour. What's this? Was creating you such a waste? Let me now wipe your tears, touch your trembling lips. You want to say something? Why do your lips tremble? Tell me—brush off your sorrows for me. I will bear everything. Pray that no thorns tear your feet. You are my creation!

Oh, in which language will you speak, O Sikha? You look at the sky with an empty gaze. Standing near the windows and looking at a kerchief of sky—that is the lot of the Sikhas. Can I compare you to Tenjin or Edmund Hillary, that you will traverse all distances? That you will thus become the saviour of the spirit of humankind? No, I am helpless. I can create in your mind the desire to cross the ocean, but I cannot give strength to your limbs. You must forgive me for that.

Here I see you. You are standing alone in the crowded Kalyan Mandap—at someone's marriage party. Many people greet you. Are you a close relative of the new bride? You saw me. Caught hold of my arm. Introduced me to your husband. But he was not interested in talking to me. Hinting that he was busy, he moved away to chat with another beautiful lady. You did not let go of my hand. The heat of your hand was slowly warming mine. Tell me, Sikha. Who is she? For whom did your husband ignore you? I couldn't know when you slipped away, but, later, I heard a lot of gossip about you. Someone was saying, "I would have jumped into a well or taken poison." Someone else responded, "Comes from a poor family. She is hanging on for the sake of the ornaments, the car, and the wealth. If it had been one of my daughters . . ." An old lady commented, "What can she do? She has two kids. The prestige of her family is at stake."

I knew then that you were the daughter of a poor family, married off to a rich man. And do you lack something, that you keep trying to hide behind your sari, jewellery, and wealth? A young man said that because your mother-in-law had suddenly been taken ill, you rushed alone from the feast and took her to the hospital. The driver was having his dinner, and when you asked for the car keys, your husband saw what you were doing. Another dimension of your identity was revealed to me. You are not only a good wife and mother but also a good daughter-in-law.

What do you understand by the term “good,” Sikha? One who bears all and cries quietly near the kitchen fire, or who rushes without a thought to the hospital in a time of need? True, I have created you, but you seem to be a little afraid. What was the purpose of your birth? Born from the sacrificial fire, Draupadi was the instrument for the destruction of the Kuru dynasty. And you flicker on—for how many years? The span of your marital life—ten or twelve years? I don’t know that lady who was with your husband, but as I grow intimate with you, she somehow looks repulsive, in spite of her beauty.

When I created you, I didn’t know that your future would be so sad. You are soaked in the mud of life—what we call figuratively the agony of life. You may not have had a childhood, but you have a past that is full of the scars of misunderstandings. I couldn’t tolerate all this thought. I created you! How could I close my eyes to the flow of your life at this unfortunate time? I waited to hear something more, but in vain. You are my creation. Without saying a word, and yet managing to say so many things, you mocked my creatorhood. Really, I am so helpless!

Again one day, I met you in front of the convent school. Holding the hands of your two children, in the crowd of other wards, you were walking toward your chocolate-coloured Maruti car. I couldn’t reach you, but I could reach the women gossiping about you. “How quiet! If she had been with her husband, her feet wouldn’t have touched the ground!” “The horse has no horn. If it had a horn, it would have torn up the very earth!” Someone else said, “Has anyone seen her husband? He didn’t turn up even on parents’ day. You have to admire this woman!” Another curtain was raised from my eyes. You are the victim of your husband’s neglect. You struggle to give your children a decent childhood. If you had narrated your woes to these women, they would probably have said, “Oh,” in front of you, and then giggled behind your back. But your courage and indifference make them gossip about you, no doubt. What are you really? Somehow, I feel demeaned in the presence of your strange personality. Did I really create you? Tell me, Sikha! How have you been able to control so much vital energy with such confidence? If you open your mouth, there will be an explosion. Probably you know it in your quiet way—Draupadi has somehow told you about this.

Once I saw you in front of the Rama Mandir. You looked ethereal, with the flowers and offerings for the god. Soothing all your agony and unhappiness, you had turned into a tranquil devotee. Today, you climbed down from the rickshaw. Walked straight in. Went to the deity. Paid your obeisance. On turning around, you saw an aged woman. I was watching you from a distance. Probably you didn't know. You came close to the woman. Gestured to her. She said, "You probably knew I would be here. Sit for a moment. Let's talk." Then your lips parted. Really, I had waited such a long time to hear you speak. My waiting came to an end.

You said, "Mother, I am living my fate. You don't have to worry about me. If my husband has lost his way, the fault is mine. If his family peace has been disturbed, I have to take the blame. Let me spend the rest of my life beneath that kerchief of sky. That I am someone's wife, someone's daughter-in-law, is enough. Why didn't you first find out whether he was married?—but I will never ask you this, not after all this time.

"Those days are gone. Poor girls like me face such problems. You are a lonely widow. But what about him? Educated, rich—why did he agree to more than one marriage? Did he have no sense of responsibility? Was he so self-indulgent? Pray to God for me, Mother. Let my children grow up well. Not so that they will take care of me when they grow up, but to be responsible heirs to their family. I have to go, Mother. It won't do to talk for so long. I have a lot to do."

You rushed away, true. But I could hide myself no longer—I stood in front of you. O Sikha, the waves of the sea rush toward you! Such grief hidden in your heart! That face that expresses such faith—that face is not entirely yours. That person whose one word of kindness can make a woman cross the seven seas—that person hardly exists. You expressed awkwardness on seeing me. Smiled. Did I get caught while acting innocent? You called me to one corner of the temple. Looked at the sky. The sky we both saw was not the entire sky! Why don't you say anything, Sikha? But I don't have the patience, the energy to ask anything. I know I should not hurt you anymore.

You signal that this kerchief of sky is yours. One cannot make a nest here. It is only enough to flap one's tiny wings and go on until one is tired. Sikha, I don't know if I should express my condolences or my congratulations to you. I only pray that your kerchief of sky takes on the colours of



the rainbow. That you find an Aladdin's lamp of great faith and assurance. Did you notice how tactfully Valmiki arranged for Sita to enter the earth during her test of fire? Otherwise, how insignificant Lord Rama would have looked next to her!



## *Misery Knows No Bounds*

Sarojini Sahoo

Translated by Gopa Nayak

*The sorrow of existence—  
Living, suffering, enduring.  
Why?  
Let me burn in the fire of sacrifice.  
Let the world live.  
Misery knows no bounds.*

**T**he pen would not have fallen if Sonali had not snatched it from me. My mother had repeatedly warned me not to take the pen to school, but it was so pretty that I wanted to show it to my friends. Every day, I played with the pen for a little while and put it back in the cupboard with great care. One of my aunts had brought it from abroad and presented it to me.

My mother said that the pen was indeed very expensive. There was a small clock at one end. I brought the pen to school to show it to Premalata. She thought I had been lying about it. She said that such a pen did not exist in this world. That's why I brought it to show her. I took her to a corner of the school field and showed her the pen. I did not go out to play during recess, as I was worried somebody might steal it.

Premalata had promised not to share the secret with anyone, but she told Sonali about the pen.

Sonali asked me for the pen after school was over. At first, I did not give it to her. I thought to myself—I will take the school bus and go home. But the bus was late. My mother had warned me not to walk home from school, because there was a wine shop on the road. Drunkards walk along the road. It is very desolate. No one will know if you are kidnapped. The main problem is the dilapidated bridge across the canal. The canal is never in use. It is full of weeds and mud. Even though my mother had asked me not to take that road, I sometimes went there with my friends.

The school bus took a roundabout route that takes almost an hour to reach our stop after dropping everyone else off. Almost every day, I arrived home after dusk. But I should have listened to my mother's advice. I made a mistake by walking home. Sonali snatched the pen and it fell into the canal. I could see the pen. If it had not been visible, I would just have gone home crying. I would not have been stuck in the mud of the canal. Both Sonali and I slowly descended under the bridge to get the pen. We tried to get the pen with a stick, but we failed. I could not leave, because I could see it. As soon as I stepped into the canal my foot was pulled under. The other foot followed suit. I could not get out of the mud. Slowly, my feet sank in, and I was scared that I would be drowned in the mud. I looked at Sonali. Sonali told me to go a bit further and get the pen.

"My feet are stuck in the mud. I can't get out. Pull me." I stretched my arms toward Sonali. She was afraid she would be drowned, so she stepped back. She told me to wait. She assured me that she would call for help. She climbed up the bank of the canal. I could not see her any longer. I kept on standing in the canal amid the weeds.

Nothing ever goes smoothly for me. This has been true since before my birth. My mother used to say that I was conceived at the wrong time. She did not want a child then. The day she knew she was expecting, she was very upset. She did not abort me, because she was scared of committing a sin. Even before my birth, an astrologer predicted, from the lines on her palm, that she would have a daughter. My mother was very sad at that moment. Astrologers often lie, she thought, and forgot the whole incident.

Apparently the prediction of the astrologer came true; even during my birth, something unusual happened. My mother's water broke

prematurely, and people found her crying bitterly, lying on the ground. She was carried to the hospital. "Both mother and child would have lost their lives if there had been even a slight delay," the doctor had proclaimed. While we were at the hospital, our house was broken into. My mother, while still at the hospital, pronounced that girls were not lucky: "Our house has been broken into with the birth of this girl." The thief was stupid, or maybe he thought that my mother's gold earrings were fake. He did not take them. He stole fifteen rupees from the drawer, which my mother had set aside for the deity. My mother was very scared when I started vomiting black things in the hospital. They inserted a pipe into my stomach and took out all kinds of rubbish. After that I got an infection and diarrhea. I was given saline after two days of life in this world. I was always ill with one thing or another.

I did not want to be fed by my mother. I never responded even though my mother tried her best. I used to suck the milk given from a bottle and go to sleep. Are you wondering why I am remembering all this? In my last test at school, my teacher asked me to write the autobiography of a dustbin. I understood what "dustbin" meant, but I could not fathom what an autobiography was. I wrote a few lines after much effort. I had seen that nobody puts waste in the dustbin, so I wrote: "The dustbin says, use me, use me, but nobody uses it."

My mother was delighted to hear this line, but she said, "You've made a mistake. An autobiography means your life history. That means you should have imagined yourself as a dustbin and written your story."

"Very difficult, isn't it?" I asked.

My mother retorted, "What's difficult about it? We used to write the autobiography of an old bullock or an autobiography of a farmer."

"It would have been better to write my own life history."

My mother just laughed and commented, "Have you lived long enough to write your history?"

Sonali has not brought anyone yet. I have been standing in the mud. The mosquitoes keep on biting me. I stand knee-deep in the mud. I go down deeper with every movement. I am so scared that I don't even try to drive away the mosquitoes. I don't know why they named me "Titli," which means butterfly—I can't fly from flower to flower in the flutter of an eyelid. I am always rebuked at home because I am not lively and

flamboyant like a butterfly. Everyone shouts at me for being lazy, dumb, and lethargic. When I was a baby, I used to go to sleep as soon as the milk in the bottle was finished. I would get up when it was feeding time again. I would never wake up just from being tossed or turned. No one heard me cry in the hospital. Unlike other babies, I never cried and waved my arms and legs. My aunt used to call me Radhigadhi—dumb Radhi. She calls me by the same name even today. My elder brother teases me as the sister of Kumbhakarna, the demon who slept through half a year. I love sleeping. I really do. But nobody likes my sleeping habit. I doze off to sleep while watching TV. I get beaten because I doze even while studying. My mother reminds me, “Sleep is an enemy.” That’s why my brain does not grow. Sleep has closed all the doors and windows of my brain. That’s why I am a very poor student. To date, anyone who has tried to teach me has lost his patience in a few days and has begun to hit me or shout at me.

Sometimes, I feel I was born only to be beaten and scolded. The only reason behind these beatings is my studies. I can’t remember anything I study, though I can remember many things from childhood. My parents always fight over my studies. My dad shouts at my mother if she beats me while teaching me. And when my dad teaches me math, I can never remember the multiplication tables. My dad loses his temper and squeezes my neck in his hands and repeats over and over, “How much is nine times seven? I’ll kill you if you can’t say.” My mother runs out from the kitchen, yelling, “Tell him, tell him, nine times seven is sixty-three.” Then my dad gets cross with my mother: “She is dumb because of you. You don’t have any patience.” Then he punches me on the back and leaves. “Why should you study when you don’t even know the multiplication tables? You are a curse on us.”

“How can you say such things about your own daughter?” mutters my mother, rushing out from the kitchen. I feel angry with myself for being responsible for the rift between my parents. My mother always gives in to my father’s loud voice and piercing eyes. My mother cries bitterly. At such times, I feel like kissing her.

Even though I can’t remember my studies, I do remember many things from my childhood. Once, when I was a child, I could not write the letter M. My mother was so upset that she picked me up and threw me down forcefully. I could not see anything for a while. Even then, the window

of my intellect did not open. Many tutors have come and gone since my childhood. Whenever a new tutor comes, my mother serves him tea in the drawing room and tells him everything about me, just like a doctor is told everything about the patient. "My daughter can't remember her studies. When she was young she used to suffer fits and had a fever. She had to be medicated to make her sleep. Maybe that's why she is a little slow. Of course, since she turned five, she has never suffered at all. She has a good brain for math. Her problem is she just can't memorize. Her IQ is a little low. I am tired of trying. Now, see if you can do anything."

The new tutor would say, "If she can do math, then everything will fall into place. There are different techniques to teaching. Don't worry." This made me feel as though I was a very sick person. I feel like my grandfather, who was taken from one doctor to another, from one nursing home to another, when he was sick. Something happened to my grandfather, and most parts of his brain did not get any blood circulation. Everyone at home said it was a stroke. Has my brain, too, become dry like a desert? In Africa, there are so many deserts; one is the Kalahari and the other is the Sahara. I get beaten because I always forget which one is in the north and which one is in the south.

Some children in my school are worse than me, but still, I am the only one who gets scolded and beaten by Mahapatra Madam. Nobody likes me at school. Like my grandfather taken from one nursing home to another, I have also been put into many schools. I remember my first school, where I had a fat lady teacher who used to hold my hand and help me write page after page. I could not write anything if she let go of my hand. She used to scream at me, "I'll tie you to that mango tree and the monkeys will bite you." There really were monkeys in the mango tree. I used to be very scared of the monkeys. I closed my eyes when I saw them baring their teeth.

My mother sometimes feels very miserable and says, "Everything is my fault. I sent her to school when she was only two and a half years old so that I could go to work."

"You did make a mistake by sending me to school at the age of two and a half," I retort.

She gets angry with me. "What could I do? How could I leave you alone with the servant? Wouldn't you have cried without me? You know

sometimes I found you'd peed or pooped your panties by the time I got back. That's why I sent you to school. I thought you would play with other children. You would not miss me. That teacher spoilt your future. I told her not to teach you. You would just go to school and come back. I categorically told her that," she says.

I didn't know if she had done the right thing or not. I can't answer smartly like my brother, nor can I stay angry at my mother for more than two minutes. My mother says that she taught my brother all twenty-six letters of the English alphabet by writing on the floor of our courtyard with a broken filter candle. She put him on a swing and taught him rhymes. She told him the legends of Dhruv, Prahlad, and Shravan Kumar while feeding him. Such things were not possible with me. During that time, her job was filled with tension. She would be told off for coming to work late, and again if she tried to leave early. That's why she could not give me proper attention. My mother says that I can't catch up with my studies, even after all the tutoring, because my foundation is weak.

When she hits me, I ask her, "What's the point in hitting me now when you didn't take care of my studies earlier?"

She gets very angry. She argues, "Most parents don't teach their children. Did our parents ever teach us? My dad did not even know which class I was in. He did not know whether I was enrolled as Padmalaya or Aparajita in school. He had sent my uncle to enroll me in the school. My uncle could not remember my year of birth or my name. He got me admitted to the school under the name Yashoda and put down an approximate age. That's why I am one year older than my real age in all the records. We grew up with that. We educated ourselves and have become something in life. Even your classmate Annapurna's father is a driver. Does her father ever teach her? She is at the top of her class. Vijayanti's father is a security guard. How come she's so good at her studies? One can only succeed if one puts in the effort."

Thinking about these comments about my friends, I remember something. All my friends have old-fashioned names like Annapurna, Vijayantimala, Premalata, and Rupkumari. Some of the boys in my class have names such as Hiralal, Jagannath, Prashant, Manoranjan, and Baburam. My brother teases me about this and says that I study in a poor school. I told my mother about this. My mother shouted at my brother:



"There is no such thing as a rich or poor school. That's why you put on a uniform." I insisted on going to a big school. My brother teases me that none of my friends' dads are rich. I told my mother to put me in his school. My mother said, "How can you go there? You are not good at your studies."

My brother and I were admitted to one of the best schools in the town. My brother was selected through an interview, but for me, my mother had to persuade the principal. After a few years, my brother went to an even better school, and I had to go the worst school in town. I never studied anything in my old school. When I was new to the school, my class teacher had me sit on the first bench because of my mother's connections, but soon I was not worthy of it. I did not feel like doing any reading or writing tasks. I never paid attention to anything. My mother used to find out from my friends about my homework and get it done for me.

Slowly, I went from bad to worse in my studies, just like I am sliding down into the mud now. Pallomi, Arpita, Ankita befriended me. I failed in all subjects except one or two. My principal insulted my mother. My mother says, "Education is a big thing in life. There is no meaning to life without education. There is no light in the life of an uneducated person."

Our maid Kiran is not educated, but still she is very happy. She does not have to remember the spelling of "distance" or "disturbance." I don't know why, but whenever I come across the spelling of a word, I get confused. I read "duration" as "donation." I read "superstition" as "separation." I can't make out the difference between "constitution" and "constituent." Whenever I see a book, I feel very tired, as if I have to walk a long road. I can't read beyond a paragraph.

All my tutors have been unique. Once, an unemployed engineering student came to tutor me. He used to come every day for an hour. He never stayed a minute longer, as he had several tutoring jobs. As soon as he came, he asked me for a thick notebook. He would ask others what was taught in class and then write the answers to all the questions in my notebook. I just sat there while he wrote the answers. "Memorize them," he would order, and then leave. I could not memorize anything. When the time for the unit tests approached, he would ask me questions. I could never answer them. He punished me by making me stand like a chair. He used to put a pencil between my fingers and hit me. He had long nails on

his left hand. My nose and ears often bled when he pinched me. I could never cry in his presence.

My mother could not have known anything because she was always in the kitchen. Afterwards, when she saw my wounds, she would feel very sad and put ointment on them. She would tell me that she would ask the tutor not to come. But the next day when the tutor came, she would smile and ask him, "Sir, please don't hit her. Yesterday, she had wounds on her nose and ears." Neither I nor my mother was happy with the tutor. My mother used to say it was better to buy books than have this tutor. He never bothered to teach anything.

The tutor was gone. My mother promised to teach me herself and left everything and started teaching me. She got all my homework done regularly. But I was scared to show it to my teacher. There had been nothing in my notebook for months. My mother was ashamed to go to the school in case the teachers might complain. At the same time, she cried over her fate. With tears in her eyes, she used to tell the story of my birth. "The doctors said that neither mother nor child would survive, but see, both of us survived. You suffer so much. You are always beaten and shouted at. I suffer thinking about you." I wipe her tears and assure her that I will put more effort into my studies.

This time, the principal at our school threw down my report card and asked my parents to come and see him. He showed my report card to my mother and asked, "How can I promote her? You can't just send your children to school. You must look after them at home." I don't know why, but my mother never uttered a single word. She did not even mention that her son was in a higher class in the same school and always took the top position.

"I have not neglected her." She just stood there, her head lowered, not saying a word. It seemed as if she would burst into tears at the slightest touch. I was amazed at her patience. The principal kept on shouting at her as if she was one of his students. I felt like pushing him off his chair. She did not utter a single word on the way home. She did not say anything while we had our supper. When she went to have a rest, she said, "Why did you come into this world? If you had to come, why weren't you born into a rich household?" I did not say anything; I did not know what to say.

I was sent to a different school. The pressure of studies in this school was lighter—that's why they put me here. The Class 1 syllabus for English was taught in Class 5. But still, I could not manage. I don't like to study. My brother used to go on excursions to Bombay and Madras. He participated in science exhibitions. He used to go trekking to hill stations with his school. But in our school, we did not even go on a picnic. Our teachers always complained about the principal, and the principal kept on firing the teachers. At least two or three teachers got replaced in a year. Hiralal urinated in the school well. Baburam broke his leg by climbing on the roof of the school. Annapurna's hair was infected with lice, and she laughed at me because my mother wears Western-style dresses. I did not want to study in this school. I knew these children. That's why I never brought the pen to school. But I had to bring it because of Premalata.

"Where did Sonali vanish to? Has she gone back home?" One of my uncles was passing over the bridge. I called out, "Uncle!" but he could not hear me. The mud has come up to my thighs. But what can I do? Will I die from drowning in the mud? Sonali is not a nice girl. I feel like crying. My mother must be standing at the gate of our house, waiting for me. She does not know that I am being drowned in the mud. When she scolds me, she always says, "Why don't you die?" But I know if I die, she will cry. She may cry for a while now, but she will be free of the burden of me. She won't cry every day. But will I really die? No, I won't. Because when my mother got my horoscope read, the astrologer predicted that I would not be good in my studies, but that my fate was not all bad. "This girl has danger to her life from fire," the astrologer said. My mother cried bitterly that day. "I know her in-laws will burn her. Why don't you understand? These days, young brides are being burnt for dowry. On top of that, you are not good at your studies. I brought you up with so much care. Someone will burn you." She kept on weeping.

That's why I will not die from drowning. Someone will surely come and rescue me. I will survive. If I die now, then how can I burn to death? No, I will not die now. Even if I am submerged up to my face, they will pull me out by my hair. But Sonali should be coming back. I could hear someone walking on the bridge. I kept on waiting. After a while, a cow passed by. Someone will surely come; someone will come before nightfall. My mother will be worried. She will send someone. They will unlock

## Spark of Light

the school doors and search for me. They will look for me at my friends' places. They will look for me on the roads. But will anyone look under the bridge? Who knows? No, no, they will notice me, because I am supposed to burn to death. I will not die from drowning in the mud.

## *Moonrise*

Supriya Panda

Translated by Sumanyu Satpathy

**A**fter tending the garden, Sujata was tired. She walked toward the gate and sat down in the shade. She had gone to bed late the previous night. She could not have helped it; there were quite a few cakes to bake. These two winter months were always the peak season for cakes. Once winter was over, she received orders only for special occasions, such as birthdays.

I must have grown old, she thought. Her limbs now felt the fatigue of sleepless nights. Her eyes felt heavy, and the lids drooped. But the roses needed tending, for this was also the season of roses.

Many had approached her that morning. Everyone said the same thing, “Nancy! How do you bake such terrific cakes? The sunflower cake, the Taj Mahal cake, the pyramid, the boat, and the teddy bear cakes. They are so beautiful to look at that one hesitates to run a knife through them. Where do you get such wonderful ideas?”

At this, Sujata’s face would light up with a sweet smile. She would feel that those compliments and admiring looks were the real rewards for her labour—one reason why she never bothered to put a fixed price tag on her cakes. The customers paid according to their sweet will. As in the case of any artist, the artistry and attractiveness of her work would clinch the deal.

In this small hill township, everyone understood cake to mean Nancy's cakes. Young and old, all called her Nancy. This amused Sujata. Nancy was the Goanese lady from whom Sujata had learned the art of baking cakes. Years had passed by; the township had changed, and so had the houses, but Sujata had not forgotten Nancy. She had never imagined that something that she had learned as a hobby would turn out to be a vocation.

She called her cakes "Nancy's cakes" out of gratitude for her mentor. People had forgotten that she was actually Sujata.

Now, wiping drops of sweat from her brow, she smiled. She opened the steel-coloured postbox at her gate. No, there was no mail for her. The box spoke in a grave voice: "You look for letters as if you receive them daily."

Sujata smiled, somewhat amused. Dusting the box with her sari end, she said, "Why are you so envious? If nothing else, don't I get at least three letters every year—on the lovely New Year's Eve?"

The box did not give up. "Yeah, those letters without the senders' addresses on them! And yet, your expectations, your love! Huh."

In the tone of a loser, and yet making one last attempt to win, Sujata retorted, "You are obsessed only with those three letters. Don't you remember those two years? How many letters I received in those two years from Bombay and from London!"

The box yawned and kept quiet. She was after all, a mere postbox; how could she talk incessantly? The big oven for baking cakes, the huge Victorian clock, and this postbox—these three talked with Sujata, noticing her utter loneliness.

It was a Saturday. The school would close early. All those homebound schoolchildren would come running. "Nancy! Nancy!" they would shout. So many kinds of voices: some shrill, some hoarse, some cuddly, and some sullen. Shrill Voice would say, "Have you made cookies for me?" And Croaking Voice with unkempt hair, "And my cake?" And Shy Cuddly Voice, "O Nancy! I love you so much!" Mint Voice would say, "See, Nancy, if I have a touch of fever!"

And Sullen Voice, "I shall never go to school again! Today, Miss asked me to stand up on the bench. I shall stay with you. I shan't go home, not even if Papa and Mommy come to take me. Never. I shall bake cakes with you."

Sujata talked with all of them sympathetically, meeting them at their age, at the same wavelength, tuned to their frequency. Some would go home after their share of cakes and cookies. Their parents, feeling guilty, would pick up those who stayed back in the garden. "Nancy! Our children trouble you a lot."

"Really? I want to be born again and again in this house, close to this nursery school to be bothered thus."

What could the parents say? Every day, at the break of day, there would be moonrise at Sujata's place. Moons rose daily at her window saying, "Nancy! Wake up, Nancy!" If one moon was dressed in red woollens, another wore a rabbit hat. If one had a broken tooth, another's eyes had traces of sleep in them. Sujata would wake up. They would all enter the garden together, and she would go for a morning walk. On holidays, they would all eat cake. Afterwards, Sujata would remind the moons of their homework. They would return home. Sujata would be all alone again. When she entered her house in silence, the grandfather clock would speak like a patriarch: "Half of the cakes you baked overnight have been eaten up by the kids. What is left to sell? How are you going to manage your household?"

When school was over, Sujata would stand near the window. The children all looked the same in uniform. One child would be left behind. Sujata's house was above ground level. The child could not climb up the steps. He used crutches. This weak child was not fond of food. Sujata would give him flowers—roses and lotuses. Grateful, he would take Nancy's hands and place them on his cheeks. "After you told them, the other children, not to snatch away my crutches or try to trip me, they don't do it anymore. I love you so much, Nancy!" Sujata would look at him, unable to say anything.

New Year's Eve was three days away. Sujata opened the postbox. No, there was no letter, again. But arrive they must. And soon. They do every year. Sujata knew who they were from, even though there were no addresses of the senders.

For back then, too, it was December. The hill town was in the grip of a severe winter. One night, Sujata's sleep was suddenly disturbed when she heard a noise in the courtyard behind her house. Getting up, she went and stood near the back door. Ah . . . what terrible pain! Someone had

sprung on her and, with strong and rough hands, shut her mouth up in a vicelike grip. She fell to the floor. Another dragged her into the house. They twisted her head so badly that she could not even breathe properly. Darkness gathered all around her. Then they released her. In the clear light, she saw that they were three. Each held a lethal weapon in his hand in readiness. Sujata stood up in great pain. She was completely soaked in sweat, even in that severe cold. Sujata became angry with herself. Just days earlier, she had been down with typhoid, fighting a lonely battle with the disease. In that acute pain and fever, she had yearned for death. But now that death confronted her, with the murderers pointing their weapons at her, she was in a cold sweat. She was ashamed of herself.

She stood upright, even though in great pain. She observed the three murderers. They were young men in their early twenties. One of them was perhaps even younger. There was a hint of a beard on his chin. Another, with brown hair, was very fair-skinned. The third young man had cruel grey eyes. Snakelike, they hissed, "Why did you open the door? If you had not seen us you would have survived. We are being pursued like mad dogs. We still have a lot of ground to cover, and we must be stealthy. Whoever spies us with our deadly weapons must die, or we shall be captured. Of course, we won't mind killing you. You already have one foot in the grave."

Tender Beard was shivering in the cold. "We can't manage without some tea. But never mind. The state you are in, you cannot make any tea. Show us the kitchen—we shall make some tea ourselves. We can do anything."

"Even kill people," Sujata couldn't help interjecting.

"What!" With that brutish cry, Cruel Eye gave Sujata a blow. She held her mouth tightly with her hand. Drops of warm blood trickled down from one corner of her lip.

In an irritated tone, Brown Hair said to his companion, "You believe in action even over trifles!"

Sujata went to the washbasin and washed her face. Tender Beard put some water in a saucepan and placed it on the stove. Going into Sujata's bedroom, the other two asked the woman, "You live alone in this big house? What do you do? What do you do for a living?"

"I bake cakes, do gardening, and love children."



"Is that all? Can you live on that alone? The old woman is surely mad!"

Tender Beard brought in some tea. Even for Sujata. She brought a plate of cookies she had baked that evening. Cruel Eye looked at the others and put one in his mouth. Pointing at the photograph of a young man on the wall, Brown Hair asked, "Who is that?"

Sujata put aside the tea and got up. Cleaning the already clean and lovely picture frame again with her sari, she stood there. "This is the photograph of an emissary of God, a doctor by profession." She kept standing there. The murderers saw that her age was slipping out of her body like a tree shedding its bark. Now she looked like a young girl, a bewitched doe in an evergreen forest. She went on and on, as if soliloquizing. "Many years ago, while driving past this town, he met with a minor accident. He stayed at my place for three days. After that, he went to London, where he used to write to me regularly. We were very young then."

"You didn't marry him?"

"One needs qualities of the highest order to deserve a marriage with the emissary of God."

Sujata had not taken her eyes off the photograph even for a moment since picking it up. She was mesmerized. Tender Beard said, "You must have been very beautiful then."

"I am beautiful even now. See, I still have such a big mirror. I see myself only in it."

Sujata cackled at her own joke. The sound of her laughter in the dead of night alarmed the murderers. Instantaneously, their hands reached for their weapons. One said in an unruffled voice, "We cannot defy party orders. Whoever gets to see us must die. We have no other option. You will have to die. You must think that we have helped you out of the loneliness of your old age. Now tell us, this being your last night, how do you feel? What thoughts come to your mind?"

"Why does that matter to you?"

"Because, in our chosen life of terrorism, death stalks us. That is why we are curious to know how it is with you."

Sujata sat on a deck chair. At the mention of death, a strange sensation ran through her body. Irritated with herself, she sat upright. Even so, she gave out an involuntary sigh. She said, "There is a rare tree in my garden

that is the only one of its kind in this town. It needs watering every day. It will die without water from tomorrow onwards. A little boy has his birthday tomorrow—I have baked for him the cake of his choice. Tomorrow, he will not be able to take it. I would have got that grandfather clock overhauled—now that will be impossible.

“I had never imagined death would come to me like this. I had imagined I would be working in the garden. A handsome man would open the gate and come in. Smiling gently, he would say, ‘Come. It is time for you to go.’ Suddenly, pain would cease; I would die with soil in my hands. In my last breath, there would be the fragrance of that soil.”

All were silent when she finished. Then Soft Beard pointed to the picture on the wall and asked, “Who is that?”

Sujata’s face brightened. “Is he not the Pied Piper of Hamelin?” she said. “You must have read that in your schoolbooks long ago. You may have forgotten by now. How would you remember these things after taking to terrorism? This piper freed Hamelin of the mice, but he was not given his due, as the townsfolk had agreed. So he led all the innocent children out of the deceitful town of Hamelin into the hills. Attracted by the music of the piper, the children followed him on their own. None of the parents could stop them from going. The pipe has always been so enchanting.”

The three continued to look at the picture; the day was about to break. Brown Hair said, “You must be thinking badly of us.”

Sujata smiled faintly. “No. I only wonder how you could turn all the qualities of a soldier into those of terrorists.”

Cruel Eye caught sight of a beautiful butterfly cake. “What a wonderful cake!”

“Hold on! Don’t move an inch!” Sujata shouted in a stern voice. “That is the birthday cake of a child. I will allow no hand that holds a deadly weapon to touch it!” She spoke so loudly that she became breathless. “There is no time. It is almost dawn. But for me, this is the time for moonrise. Finish your work quickly. Kill me fast. Ensure that no violence takes place in the presence of the children. Finish me off before that.”

Sujata stood up fully prepared. Closing her eyes, she prayed to God. Let the boy with crutches be all right. She silently bade goodbye to the wall clock and the poor boy. She waited for the sound of the bullets of the deadly weapons. It was getting late. She opened her eyes and saw that the

three were turning toward the back door. Just then she heard the sound of the front gate opening. The expression on Cruel Eye's face changed at lightning speed. He reached the window quickly but carefully. Sujata, too, looked toward the gate through the curtains. "This is the time for my moonrise."

A child was entering through the gate. "Nancy! Nancy! Good morning." A very healthy child sauntered in. A little girl followed. After them, more and more moons, or maybe would-be-worlds.

Cruel Eyes looked at Sujata. Such bright light fell on her face! He felt as if he had himself been a fugitive, carrying the burden of the deadly weapons on his shoulders and fleeing from place to place for months, one moonless night after another, and at long last, he saw in Sujata's face a shining full moon. By now, his friends had started calling him from behind. He gave Sujata a look of annoyance, and said, "Do not think that I could not kill you. It was just because the children came in."

Sujata could not help smiling at this bit of arrogance from the young man. "Take care, boys! I wish you safe passage!"

They must have had a safe passage, because from then on, Sujata received three greeting cards on every New Year's Eve.

This afternoon, too, Sujata was expectantly waiting for the cards and talking to the postbox. Suddenly, she collapsed. The following day, when the funeral procession started, all the children of the town joined it, ignoring all disapproval by the elders. The funeral procession turned into a victory procession.



## *Shadows of the Moon*

Mona Lisa Jena

Translated by the author

**A**gain my phone rang. It was just before midnight. An auspicious December night under a full moon had somehow turned into an ominous dark night. I slammed the receiver down; otherwise, he would keep on badgering me, maybe throughout the night from some liquor den. Inebriated and out of his senses. All of a sudden, his face flashed before my eyes . . . and his lengthy letters written to me on pink rose-petal-tinted letterhead.

He was then an army man, posted somewhere in a mountainous Kashmir valley far away. We had come into contact on one such December night for just a few hours in a railway station waiting room. Over his olive-green army uniform, he was wearing a sparkly pearl-hued jacket, of a sort that I had never before or have since seen anyone else wearing. He was gazing quietly at everyone around him, a Roald Dahl book in his hand. From time to time, he would ask others about their destinations and narrate his own experiences of those places.

Though he claimed to hail from the northeast, he didn't have the mountain people's sturdy features, their squinting eyes, their radiant golden complexions. He was handsome, a gallant soldier, quite masculine, but his fingers were long and attractive, exuding romance.

I liked glancing at him from time to time. That is why when he handed me a small piece of paper and asked me to write down my name, address, and phone number, at 3:45 in the morning, I wrote without hesitation, as if hypnotized. I had forgotten all the restrictions in which a girl from a conservative family is trained—about sharing even a few words with a stranger. In fact, I was captivated by his demeanour, attire, and winning personality. Everything about him seemed so charming. I was most fascinated by his large harmonica, on which he was playing old Hindi film songs, adding a lilt to such a wintry night in the waiting room. With his music, he could have added perfume to budding flowers . . .

After that, he wrote me a letter . . . eight pages long, on pink paper. It was the first time someone had written to me with such a warm heart. It didn't come in the usual postal wrapper but in a small, ochre-hued official envelope, which reached me in a torn condition. And it came to my mother's notice first, the letter of temptation . . . She was very annoyed. But his letter didn't contain anything at all to cause uneasiness. He wrote about the army—the monotonous life and the hardships. He had met with a minor accident and was writing to me from his hospital bed. God knows he could never forget my eyes and my Rapunzel-like hair, which hung in a braid to my waist in those days. He wrote that, except for the barracks, the place was depressingly desolate. The ice-capped mountains look beautiful from a distance, but they burn your skin; they sing like fire. When the nights deepened, his agony became increasingly acute. He would wait for my response, and he even wrote that my letters would seem like a *kesar* garden out of season . . . a letter from a strange land expressing a special young woman's sentimental feelings. I don't know why I never replied to him. Probably I was scared. I was apprehensive that he would reply to my letters, and I lacked the courage to reveal my warmth.

One night, my phone rang. "Padmaji?"

I was stupefied, as if hit by a cloudburst. Those days, a phone call in the drawing room would make everyone in the family rush there. And it was a late night in winter. Those late phone calls seemed more horrifying than the dreadful hooting of an owl.

Before he could utter a word, I spoke in a voice as stern as that of the portly warden at my ladies' hostel: "Please do not call so late at night. Our family rules do not allow this." I signed off and, to squash any hint

of doubt from my watchful family, slammed down the receiver. Since then, my mother had been fuming and fretting over the man. The man who had already sent me four letters and had been flattering me, without any restraint.

Ten days later, his letter arrived. This time he was rueful, each word echoing an apology for his behaviour a hundred times. I could imagine him weeping silently and playing his harmonica soulfully among the mists in the rows of pines. I felt pity and sorrow for him in equal measure. When you deliberately hurt someone deeply enough, the sadness becomes a part of you, too. I presumed he would never dare write to me again.

But he kept on writing to me, writing from the undisclosed address of his army cantonments or barracks, for a long time. I could sense that he was lost in my charm, even in my love. Perhaps he had been reminded of someone very dear to him when he saw me—possibly with some resemblance to my eyes and my long hair neatly tied up into a thick braid! He had mentioned his family. It was a large one and they lived in a palatial mansion. His wife was the only daughter of his very rich father-in-law, and an amazing singer. She could also paint wonderfully, and in her father-in-law's house, she was doted upon and treated like a delicate flower.

Having seen him, I couldn't help but wonder how such a graceful, handsome man could cope with the army's disciplined, rigorous life. He had mentioned that he was a good singer, a baritone. I could not even imagine to what pitch, what nuances his baritone might reach as he sang. I deliberately stood firm against him, perhaps because of my compulsive urge to avoid him. His fantasy of walking hand in hand with me through the saffron and rose gardens and in the pine forest on a moonlit night, trying to catch a glimpse of the "constellation of Ursa Major," didn't impress me. I thought he was exaggerating his dreams . . . and yet he kept on writing to me for months. Many times, his letters appeared to echo earlier ones, as if he was writing identical words to express the same feelings.

After seventeen years, when he phoned to wish me well on the Holi festival (he never failed to phone me for the occasion, though my phone was dead most of the time), I told him, "I will come visit your state and meet you." He was astonished and thought I was only teasing him, as I

lived in a small hamlet in Odisha, and he in the far-off Naga Hills. But he went on in his usual warm and friendly way that he would be absolutely delighted to see me. He was sad to know that I had not married as yet, and he said that had he married me, he would imagine his dreams were true and roam in the clouds and among the stars all the time . . .

It was quite late at night. I had not yet given him my cell phone number. Maybe he could not believe that I would actually negotiate such a distance through difficult terrain just to meet him. How could he imagine that a girl from a simple middle-class Indian family would dare meet a man whom she barely knew, so far away? I noted down the name of his village, Khatkhatti.

Some days later, I confided to an Assamese friend that I wished to visit Dimapur. "My lover lives there," I said. He did not probe for further details but was ready to accompany me. We set out for Dimapur. It is quite a distance from Guwahati. The route greatly resembles Odisha terrain—for miles, stretches of rice fields and plains. It was getting warmer, and all through these hours, anxiety was rising inside me. My "boyfriend" was waiting for me at the railway station in Dimapur.

This man I was so nervously preparing to meet again had kept the same army crewcut. His was a refined look, and his eyes glittered. But instead of that pearly white drape, he had on a beautiful Naga jacket, red and black striped.

I had changed a lot myself. I had cropped my hair and become plump, and I wore thick glasses. My guess was that he wouldn't recognize me right away, but he stooped a little and whispered, "Padmaji!" When he saw my face light up, he could immediately tell that it was me, but an altered and matured version of that slender girl he had known seventeen years earlier. We headed for a fancy hotel to have our lunch that day. It was a wonderful, vibrant place. The antirrhinum flowers were in bloom in vivid blood-red hues, and the bird-of-paradise flowers were dazzling! The leaves, to me, seemed greener, the sky a deeper shade of blue, and the wind more lucid and fresh. In the distant hills, clouds settled in many layers.

He ordered some drinks and ate heartily. He recommended that we taste the locally brewed rice beer and the pork curry—"That is the speciality here." He was happy to treat my Assamese friend and was cracking jokes with the same panache as before. He was saying how if one has immense



zest for life and a flair for dance and music, and is lucky enough to find love, there is no reason why anybody should ever feel miserable. I was wondering how this man could afford to be so nonchalant all the time. It is a fact that he had it in him to charm any woman with his personality. He was complaining to my Assamese friend how I had never replied to his numerous letters, never phoned him . . .

Dusk was looming and I was getting desperate to meet his wife and see his family at his house. I was to see this woman, endowed with such a range of artistic gifts, and also that house he'd described as a palace . . . A thousand questions filled my heart.

When my Assamese friend left us alone for a brief spell, my host leaned closer and asked shyly, "Padmaji! Can you kindly lend me two thousand rupees? I have forgotten to bring my wallet with me. I will repay it tomorrow morning. I was feeling uncomfortable about mentioning this in front of your friend . . ."

I handed him the money without a word. He paid the restaurant bill.

I did not find my Assamese friend very enthusiastic about this friend of mine. He appeared to be more concerned about my comfort and happiness, and my dignity. We walked a little distance to see off my Nagamese friend. It was raining outside the hotel, but no car was waiting to take my friend home. I told him that we would be ready by eight the next morning, and he replied that he himself would come and take us to his village.

Night descends very early in Dimapur. The roads become deserted. By eight o'clock, the shopkeepers pull their shutters down. This is a strange place, a trade junction for Assam, Burma, Manipur, and Nagaland. Here, drug traffickers merrily run fiefdoms and a simple brawl can lead to attacks with knives and daggers.

My Assamese friend smiled and asked, "Is this man really your boyfriend?"

I told him the truth. "No, seventeen years ago, I met him in the waiting room at the New Delhi railway station. Since I was visiting this part of India, I felt tempted to see him, to get a first-hand impression of his real life and his dreams."

He sighed and murmured, "Why did that gentleman disappear into the darkness like that? What happened to his car? Especially when Nagaland is such a disturbed area to travel in at night!"

I bade him goodnight, asking him to come by at eight o'clock the next day. Exhausted, I went straight to sleep.

It was past eight thirty in the morning; we had had our breakfast of toast and omelet. We were waiting for him to arrive. There was no trace of the man who drools over his Padmaji. My friend could sense my uneasiness but didn't say anything. As if it was his responsibility to fulfill my desires!

I was beginning to believe that the man had in fact cheated me. The day before, he had borrowed two thousand rupees from me, but there was no sign of his paying it back. I was feeling insulted. Since we knew the name of his village, we decided to go on our own to visit it, eighteen miles away. The dense foliage and greenery along the roadside, the deep purple and pink cosmos flowers all over were a sight to behold, captivating us. The wooden houses with boundary walls made of bamboo strips were so smooth and beautiful, as were the Nagas, who were hardworking and extremely hospitable.

We did not find it very difficult to locate his house in Khatkhatti village. He was very popular. On the fringes of the village stood his three-roomed house, walled by stone. A small pond nestled against the house, with a concrete bench nearby. He was not at home when we got there. Two elderly couples were playing cards, huddled together in the mild sunshine that chilly morning. From time to time, they called out to their little granddaughter and ordered cups of tea. They were punctuating their words with the choicest expletives. They were the parents of my host and his wife, about whom I had heard so much. Within a few years, they will go heavenwards, one after the other. Before that, they might become immobile and would have to depend on others. Four aged people living together in a love-hate bond. But Shрила, the man's wife, was not saying a word in response to their nonstop grumbling, nor did she mutter anything behind their backs like many other women would in similar circumstances. She was silent about her helplessness, her predicament. She had to shoulder all the family responsibilities, against all odds, and then she had to look after their growing children. Death and life flowed parallel at the same time for her. The tougher part was their acute penury. One glance said it all. It was difficult for them even to have one full meal a day.

There was a charming smile permanently etched in Shрила's eyes and on her lips. She looked like a beautiful, unsullied flower. They were Christian

by religion. They did not have much to get by. Only some bedding to sleep on and some farming equipment, and a few tin trunks with some clothes. The house was made of wood, including the floors. On the slanted roof, they grew creepers of white gourd and some wildflowers of azure hues. Behind the main house was a kitchen garden, where they grew some vegetables and two rows of corn. All around, colourful wildflowers festooned the landscape.

Although the house stood out from a distance, it was very simple, unenviable, and anonymous. It was Shrila who looked after the entire household. She also had to supplement the household expenses by working part-time as a nurse in the local infirmary. She underwent bone-breaking hardship every day. At night, when her husband stroked her with his long, pink, pointed, affectionate fingers, she would drop off to sleep instantly. She would not even know how night ended and dawn arrived. Her husband's embrace was like an angel's companionship for her. She loved him deeply, or else how could she be so hospitable to us, especially to a woman she was introduced to as her husband's friend?

Her husband was not around. Only his colourful jacket was hanging on the wall of his house, the one he had worn the day before, when he had come to see us. No doubt Raaj had never mentioned a word about us to his wife. He would not have met us again, let alone have returned my two thousand rupees. I could never have imagined that the reality of his household would be so grim. Up to that point, I had been quietly jealous of his wife, his family. I had also been fancying myself as romantically linked to him. Although I had never replied to any of his letters and never treasured them, I had nonetheless awaited them eagerly. It was a fact that, although he had been expelled from the armed forces for drinking and womanizing, he would never ill-treat his wife or beat her in a drunken rage or ever speak a cruel word to her. It was so apparent in the face of his wife, which reflected not a trace of such behaviour.

Just then, he appeared, like a bolt from the blue. He was back with some fish that he had gone to catch in the nearby stream. He was keeping himself busy with such small jobs, in addition to earning his livelihood with a petty supply business in the area and being active in local politics. Clearly, he could cope with his poverty. Leaning over the fence, his eyes fell on us and he turned pale with embarrassment and fright. His abject

penury was the total opposite to the wealthy palatial building he had been telling me about all those years.

I was wondering about myself now—how could I have managed in Shрила’s place? Could I ever have been happy? It’s not that I am entirely comfortable with my own lifestyle, but to be the wife or even the beloved of such an imposter? And what thoughts crossed his mind? He was standing so helplessly there, as if rooted to the ground, his mouth hanging open. There was this shadowy tinge of losing everything in a flash. This ugly and pathetic turn of events made me numb with sadness as well. Perhaps he was reminded of my words then . . . I had told him on the phone that I would surely visit his home one day when I got a chance. A strange commitment of love. But how strange are the ways of life! It doesn’t hesitate to sever the wings of a butterfly flitting so happily from place to place!

There was pain everywhere, spreading like mellow sunshine. The wound was fresh. And its shadows stretched as far as the distant mountains. Although we stood facing each other like mirrors, we could not even see each other’s face. On our way back, my Assamese friend took my cold hands and poured some warmth into them, saying, “Don’t lose heart. Thank God, his wife is both deaf and mute. There is a saying that Nagas can lie at the drop of a hat . . .”

The dripping shadows of the deep green forest across the road were enfolding the smoke issuing from his heart, burning everything up, and the cinders concealed a man’s *joie de vivre*, of which he had been robbed just a few minutes ago.

## *Sin*

Paramita Satpathy

Translated by Snehaprava Das

**H**alfway down the road, it occurred to Bunu that he had not had anything for breakfast before leaving for school, and now large flames of hunger leaped in his stomach. How could Mother do this to him? How could she send him out without food?

His eyes moistened. Had or hadn't he asked for food? Yes, he had. What was Mother's reply? Bunu tried to recollect. "There is nothing to eat now. Go to school. I shall have watered rice and roasted potatoes ready for you when you return."

Watered rice with roasted potatoes!

Bunu could almost taste it. But why could the roasted potatoes and watered rice not be prepared in the morning? And exactly by what hour of the morning, according to Bunu's calculations, should the food have been ready? He used to start for school at nine-thirty. He had gotten out of bed at seven-thirty. Bunu could tell whether it was seven or nine in the morning by watching the position of the sunlight on the wall at the back of their house, and when he returned from school, it would be one in the afternoon. His mother had taught him just that much about measuring time.

But how was it that Mother did not give him anything to eat this morning?

What did he eat last night? Bunu tried to remember but could not. He had fallen asleep by evening. There was just the faint memory of Mother waking him up and making him drink some sort of warm, thick liquid. Whatever it was, it had not been tasty, nor had it satisfied his hunger.

His stomach churned. He dismissed the idea of going to school and walked back home. His father had gone out in search of work. He could not see his younger brother and sister. His mother was sitting outside, holding the baby, the youngest, in her lap. Maybe she was breastfeeding the baby. "Mother, where are Manu and Kunu?" Bunu asked.

"Who knows? Maybe playing in the dust somewhere," his mother replied distractedly, as she gazed at the file of ants crawling along the ground below the veranda.

"I am hungry. What is there to eat?" Bunu asked in a low voice.

Mother looked at him in surprise, as if jerked out of a reverie.

"You have not gone to school! Didn't I tell you to?"

"But I haven't eaten anything. I shall have something to eat and then go."

"What? The studies will wait for you? Impudent boy! What can I give you? There is nothing to eat today. Go to school, or else go to hell," Mother snapped fretfully. "These children will eat me alive!"

Bunu looked at Runu, who sucked at Mother's breast with a contentment that was almost divine. Bunu was stricken with envy. For a moment, he was tempted to wrench Runu off Mother's breast and dump her on the floor. Bunu wanted to usurp her place in Mother's lap and suck the nectar to his heart's content. But the next moment, he realized how absurd his wish was. What a shameful idea! Mother kept on reminding him that he was already ten—a big boy. How could he suck at Mother's breast like little Runu?

How did Runu like the taste of the milk? Bunu wondered. When had Bunu himself last had milk? He had forgotten the taste, but it must be extremely delicious—Bunu was sure of that. He glanced once more at Runu from the corner of his eye and immediately looked away. After all, she was his own little sister! The greedy glance might cause her some harm!

Meanwhile, Mother had probably forgotten her anger against Bunu and kept looking at the wall, as if she were talking to someone who couldn't

be seen. Bunu went to the backyard of the house. Manu and Kunu were playing there, sitting on the bare earth.

“Come here, brother, and eat,” the tousled-haired Manu called loudly as her eyes fell on Bunu. Bunu glanced at her—her nose running on the left side, her right cheek smeared with dust, a rubber band holding her wavy and matted copper-coloured hair behind her head. She wore an oversized frock; its neckline hung loose from one of her shoulders. It must be from someone else much older than Manu. Just like the pants Bunu himself wore. Mother must have got the frock from someone’s house, just as she had the pants, Bunu guessed.

Unconsciously, Bunu’s hand touched his pants; he hitched the single knot at his belly a little tighter and looked at the food Manu was pointing at. There were some pebbles, flowers, and tiny pieces of leaves in three or four coconut shells. An arum leaf was nearby. Manu took out a little of each from the shells and put them on the leaf.

“Brother will eat this,” she said and watched Bunu eagerly.

“Shut up, you fool,” Bunu said and rapped her lightly on the head. Then he ran away. When he reached the edge of the pond, Bunu turned to look. He saw Manu rubbing both her eyes with her dirty palms.

Why is the hunger so acutely felt when there is nothing to eat? Last night, he had gone to sleep almost without food, but he had not felt hungry. Hunger is a strange passion, Bunu thought. The more he tried to drive it out of his mind, the stronger it grew. It filled every nook and cranny of his mind; he could think of nothing else. Bunu walked along the bank of the pond and went down the steps that descended to the water. At that hour of the morning, all his friends were at school.

Bunu collected some stones and began throwing them one by one into the water. He had heard that there were many fish in that pond. There had been a feast in the village sometime back, Bunu remembered. The fisherman had caught a number of fish from the pond in his net. The entire morning was spent in the fishing operation. Bunu and all his friends thronged the bank of the pond. Several species, big and small, were caught in the net; there were big catfish, gudgeons, carps, with many small fish among them. The fisherman picked out the smaller ones and threw them back into the water. Bunu and his friends asked the fisherman to give some of the small fish to them, but he refused.

After midday, all the fish were laid down on the nearby platform. Amid quarrels and heated arguments over the division, the families finally received their respective shares. The fish were either given whole or cut into pieces so that everyone would get the same amount. Bunu's family received a large gudgeon as their share. His father grumbled a little because he did not get a carp, but in the end, he had to compromise. He returned with the big gudgeon; Bunu and his brothers and sisters followed him home. It was late afternoon by the time Mother had cleaned and cut up the fish and cooked the fish curry. Rice had been cooked that morning. They sat down in a circle around the rice pot and the pan that contained the fish curry and ate to their heart's content. Bunu's mouth watered as the memory of the delicious food came back to him. Ah! What a cheerful day that was! Father had not gone out to work but had stayed home to eat rice and fish curry.

Couldn't a large fish come within the reach of his hand? Bunu thought wistfully as he sat on the steps watching the water of the pond. He would have grabbed it quickly and given it to his mother to cook. But nothing like that happened. Bunu's mind was filled with bitterness.

Bunu stood up abruptly, as if remembering something, and walked straight back home. "Mother, has the rice been cooked?" he asked his mother with an air of maturity, but without looking at her.

"What rice?" Mother snapped back. "How can you ask for rice at ten o'clock in the morning? Nothing is going to be cooked now. I am busy. I have so much housework to attend to, and just see what the boy is asking . . . Go away." Mother appeared to be utterly vexed.

"What happened to the rice I brought from that paddy?" Bunu asked in a serious voice, pretending not to have heard what his mother had said. Again, he did not look at her face. Despite the serious veneer he kept up outwardly, inside Bunu was afraid that his mother might ask him to go back to school.

"Which paddy? You speak as though you have remembered something very important!" said Mother. Her tone sounded amused.

"The paddy that I picked up from the Mohanty family's field at harvest time. That paddy is mine. Cook the rice from that paddy now, and give it to me." This time Bunu's voice was even more serious, as if he was demanding justice. Perhaps Mother has forgotten about school, Bunu thought, and he felt bolder.



His mother burst out laughing but stopped just as abruptly. "Why, you have become very bold, it seems!" she snarled at Bunu. "You picked up just about one kilogram from that paddy in ten days. Nearly six months have passed since. Do you expect the rice of that same paddy to be still there for you to gobble up? And what about the rice this family of five is eating two times every day? A chick of a boy! Just imagine his boldness! He is claiming his own share of rice! Get away from here or I'll thrash you with this piece of split log! You won't be getting rice or anything else before midday. Do you hear?"

Mother's voice sounded somewhat weak and depressed toward the end of her outburst. There was something in her tone that made Bunu feel uneasy; he turned and ran out of the house through the back door.

"Really, how can poor Mother help it?" Bunu reasoned with himself. He knew that there was nothing to eat at home. Madhu Sahu, the grocery-shop owner, refused to give anything on credit. Bunu himself had returned empty handed from the shop more than once. Mother would then ask, "Did you ask him with real earnestness? Have or have you not assured him that we would pay within a couple of days? Didn't he agree to give even one kilogram of rice, if not two?" Bunu could still hear the distress in Mother's voice as she said that.

Hunger dragged his feet to the small snack-shop at the crossroad, but he knew that it was no use. The sight of tasty snacks would only increase the hunger. But he seemed to have lost control over his feet; they moved toward the shop as if pulled by some unseen force. Bunu stood in front of the shop. On the wooden counter was a big aluminum platter that contained some *vadas* and a few *pakodas*. They had been fried earlier that morning, but these few had remained unsold, Bunu guessed. It was nearing noon. Who would buy such items at lunchtime? People would return home from work to have their midday meal. These things would be left and Jagu Anna, the shopowner, would surely give them away to somebody, Bunu thought, still staring at the platter.

"Hey, why are you standing in front of the shop? Haven't you gone to school? Go away!" Jagu Anna yelled.

Bunu did not move. He looked once at the platter and then at Jagu Anna, who was putting the teakettle on the stove. Only two men sat on the bench inside the shop. One of them held a tea glass in his hand; the other's hand was empty. Perhaps Jagu Anna was going to prepare tea for

the other customer, Bunu thought. But would they like to eat these *vadas* and *pakodas* that had been fried in the morning and had become hard and cold? Never! Bunu was sure of it. Would he ask Jagu Anna to give him a few? Bunu could not decide; the words remained stuck in his throat.

“Leave here immediately or face the consequences! Obstinate boy! Hanging around here when you should be at school. Wait—I’m going to report this to your father.” Jagu Anna put down the kettle with a bang and stood up. He had wound a red napkin about his waist. His belly was black and bulged out awkwardly as a result of the malnutrition he had suffered in his childhood; it seemed to have grown bigger in his excess of anger.

“How he drove me away!” Bunu reflected gloomily as he ran from the place. “Go to school, go to school; everyone says the same thing. Does anyone want to know if he has had anything to eat? No one says, ‘You don’t have good clothes, you don’t have a pair of slippers, the book satchel is ancient, dirty, and tattered. How can you go to school?’ Does anyone have any sympathy for me?” Bunu thought bitterly.

Hadn’t Bunu gone to school before? He had passed Class 2 and was in Class 3. Last year at school, they gave *khichdi* to the students at noon. He would eat his fill and return home in a joyous mood. The year before last, they had been given large, puffy buns during lunch hour. How delicious they tasted! Soft, like cheese. But nobody knows what happened—the practice of giving lunch to the school’s students was discontinued six months ago.

Bunu turned off the straight road and stepped down to the narrow footpath leading to the farmland. There was a thick bush at the edge of the field. A slight movement caught Bunu’s attention. He stopped. What was it? Bunu came a little closer and looked. Why, it was a hen! A lone hen of a reddish-brown colour! It was moving about and pecking at grains. How had the hen come here to this lonely spot? Bunu wondered. Where were the others? Bunu looked around but saw no one. He was curious and ran a little closer to see its reaction. At first the bird continued indifferently to peck food from the earth, but it hopped away as Bunu came closer. Again, Bunu tried to reach it, and the hen ran about in different directions to dodge him. Bunu’s curiosity grew; he tried to play cat and mouse with the bird, following it more cautiously. The hen, too, became cautious and watched the boy from the corner of its eye.

Bunu advanced toward the hen step by step, hiding himself behind the thick bushes. The hen had stopped moving; it was perhaps a little tired after all its exertions. It moved its head around, probably to see if Bunu was somewhere close by. When it did not see him, the hen seemed relieved and went back to pecking at the earth. Bunu waited patiently for some time. His heart was thumping and he was sweating profusely. He waited until the hen had got over its fear completely and was pecking at the grain, its back to the bush. Without making the slightest noise, Bunu lunged at the hen with all the force he could gather and fell over the bird, crushing it with the entire weight of his body. The hen was not at all prepared for such an attack and surrendered without offering any resistance. Perhaps such an experience was not new to the hen; the master's young children had often played games like this with it. Bunu lay on top of the hen for quite some time. When he became convinced that the bird had become calm and steady under him, he rose triumphantly, clutching the creature to his belly with both hands.

"Come, I shall take you back to your home," Bunu said patronizingly. "You belong to the Dasa family, don't you? What are you doing here alone in this jungle? Aren't you afraid of the jackals and the wild cats?" Bunu asked the bird. The hen remained motionless against Bunu's belly; perhaps it was trying to draw warmth from him. It did not make the slightest noise.

Bunu walked off, still clutching the hen to his body. After he had walked a little distance, Bunu stopped abruptly and looked at the hen. It was a plump bird. There was a small orange-coloured crest on its head. Bunu wondered how many eggs were inside the hen's belly. How tasty is egg fry! Bunu had eaten egg fry long, long ago, when he was very young. The children of the Dasa family must eat egg fry regularly, he thought enviously. The Dasa family had a number of such fowls: a couple of cocks and many hens. They roamed about the threshing yard, pecking away. Periodically, chicks would appear. Bunu had seen all of this looking over the fence that enclosed the threshing yard. How he wished to catch hold of a chicken or two and take them home for him and Manu to play with. He would rear the chicks; they would grow to become hens and lay eggs!

But what happened to the chicks of the Dasa family that grew up to become hens or cocks? Could it be that the Dasa family killed them and

ate their flesh? Yes, Bunu decided, they must be doing that! What would chicken curry taste like? His teacher used to say that one has to eat meat and eggs to gain strength in one's body. That must be why the Dasa children looked so healthy and strong and had such self-confidence—it was because they ate rice and chicken curry, Bunu concluded.

Rice and chicken curry!

The hunger came back to haunt Bunu's stomach. What would it be like to eat the flesh of this red hen? Bunu wondered. But, for that, the bird would first have to be killed, then skinned and cut into pieces. It could be cooked only after that. As he thought all this over, Bunu turned and walked back to the bush where he had first discovered the hen. He sat down near the bush, holding the hen in his lap. Bunu's body almost hid the hen; only its head was sticking out. Bunu stroked the bird's neck and tried to feel it. The hen's neck was slender but strong. Bunu tightened his hand around it, slowly at first and then with more force. The hen was startled and tried to turn its head away. But Bunu clutched it more tightly, squeezing its throat. Nothing happened. The frightened hen only stretched its neck a little and wriggled and writhed, attempting to release itself from Bunu's tight grip.

Then, with both hands, Bunu grabbed the hen's elongated neck and twisted it, applying all the force he could muster. The hen trembled hard in Bunu's lap and scratched at his thigh. But Bunu kept on squeezing, harder and harder. The hen stopped scratching. Bunu released its neck, and the hen's head dropped to one side. Bunu threw it down on the ground and stood up. As soon as it fell, the bird began to flap its wings hard and scratch at the air and the earth in mortal pain. Bunu looked around, picked up a large stone, and began hammering at the hen's head and neck. After a few blows, the hen became still. Blood began to drip onto the ground from its battered head and neck, and a layer of yellow slowly spread across its half-open eyes. Bunu picked it up and cast a furtive glance around him. He hugged the bird tightly to his belly and, hiding it under the school uniform he was wearing, ran back home at great speed.

Bunu's mother was lighting a fire in the hearth; perhaps she sensed something as she swivelled around. Her eyes opened wide in astonishment and fear. The front of Bunu's school uniform was soaked in blood. Without wasting time, Bunu squatted down and took the dead hen out

from under his shirt, placing it on the kitchen's earthen floor. He did not glance even once at his mother's face as he did so.

"Hey, what is all this? Whose hen is this? Where did you get it?" his mother asked, completely taken by surprise.

Bunu didn't answer all the questions his mother asked. "I got it on the footpath between the paddy fields," he said shortly.

"Tell me whose hen this is." Mother's tone was sharp.

Bunu shook his head to say he did not know. But he could not bring himself to look at his mother, because this time, too, he was lying.

"We shall have chicken curry." Bunu's voice was a little above a whisper; he raised his face and looked imploringly at Mother.

The hard lines on the face of Bunu's mother slowly disappeared, and her eyes sparkled in excitement, but she did not express it in words. "Your uniform is a mess. Quickly—take it off and hide it under that empty gruel pot. Wash yourself, then go and play outside. Ask Manu to come to me."

There was an unusual kind of enthusiasm in Mother's voice. She took a five-rupee note out of the knot tied in the corner of her sari end and gave it to Manu, asking her to get one kilogram of rice from the shop. She said to tell the shopkeeper that they would pay the rest of the money when Father returned from work. Mother asked Bunu to fetch water from the well; she washed his blood-soaked school clothes inside the house. Then she cut the hen into pieces, hiding its feathers, bones, and all the other waste under the inverted gruel pot, and busied herself cooking rice and chicken curry.

Bunu's father returned home after noon, and Mother briefly explained everything to him.

Father slapped Bunu hard on his back. "You are a mischievous boy," he said. But Bunu didn't feel the pain. He had expected worse punishment than this from Father for the crime he had committed.

Everyone greedily ate the rice and chicken curry, Bunu noticed. Saliva all but dripped from his sister Manu's mouth as she devoured the curry. But Bunu could not enjoy the food with the others. Time and again the memory of the red hen sitting quiet and still in his lap, and the yellow parchment that had covered its eyes when it died, returned to him. But the hidden pride of being able to get such a delicious meal for his own family soon drove Bunu's uneasiness away.

When night came, Bunu's parents went to the back of the house; his father carried a hoe and his mother carried the gruel pot that contained the hen's feathers and so on. They dug the earth quietly and buried the remains of the hen. Bunu's mother washed and cleaned the kitchen. Then they slept peacefully.

In the morning, Bunu heard a noise as he was examining his school clothes to see if they had dried properly. He turned and saw the Dasa family's second son standing in the front yard. There was a policeman with him. Bunu's father was sitting outside; perhaps he did not have to go to work that day.

"There he is, the thief! Look at him sir, how he sits like a gentleman!" said Dasa's son, pointing at Bunu's father. The policeman looked grimly at Bunu's father for a moment; then he tramped into the house, heading straight toward the kitchen, Dasa's son close at his heels. Bunu's mother quickly got up, drew the veil of her sari over her head, and came out of the kitchen. Bunu's father had also followed them inside the house.

"Try to smell it, sir—these people have killed our hen and eaten its flesh. Look sir, look carefully." The young man went on speaking. Bunu's mother stood plastered to the wall, as if she would push herself inside it. His father stood in silence. The policeman sniffed as if trying to trace the smell, then turned and walked out to the kitchen. With his stick, he toppled and shifted some of the small pots and other items kept there, and then strode out to the backyard. Dasa's son and Bunu's father followed him.

Bunu's heart was beating hard; he well knew the nature of this second Dasa son. He was the worst tempered and most dangerous one in their family. Bunu remembered an incident a couple of years ago. He had plucked two cucumbers from their orchard, and, while he was running away, Bunu had come face to face with this particular young man. Bunu could still feel the burning pain on his cheeks of the two hard slaps he had received from him.

When Bunu's parents had buried the hen's remains in the darkness of the night, they must have let some clue go unnoticed. The keen eyes of Dasa's son immediately found it. He began to dig the earth. He picked out the hen's feathers from inside the hole and stood up triumphantly, as if he had seized a fortress. Standing aside a little, Bunu watched his

father. The policeman was asking him something and he was shaking his head in denial.

"He is a habitual thief, sir," the young man said emphatically. "He steals everything, big or small, that he can lay his hand on. Last year, some of my mother's jewellery was stolen—it was never recovered, nor was the thief caught. I am sure this fellow committed the theft and sold the jewellery. You yourself now have proof that these people are professional thieves; they can't even let a hen alone." The pitch of his voice rose as he spoke.

"What was that again? I have stolen your jewellery? How dare you bring these baseless accusations against me!" Enraged, Bunu's father rushed at the son of the Dasa family.

"Who else if not you? It is by sheer chance there's proof of your crime this time. Otherwise you would have gone scot-free like you did in the earlier instances," declared the policeman, as though pronouncing a verdict.

"I have not stolen anything, sir. Please do not listen to him," Bunu's father implored.

"Shut up, you liar—you have sold the jewellery you stole. With the money, you had earrings made for your wife and got new clothes. I know everything," Dasa's son said loudly.

"Now you will reap the consequences in the prison cell." The policeman jeered at Bunu's father as he hit at his knees with his stick.

"You have joined hands with them, haven't you!" said Bunu's father accusingly. "And why not? You have been handsomely paid—you will readily accept their lies as the truth."

"Really! How dare you talk so big! You notorious thief! Come along, let's listen to what you have to say." The policeman struck hard at Bunu's father's knees and propelled him out of his home with the help of the stick, much like one would move cattle.

"He is innocent. My son killed the hen unwittingly. Please let him go—we shall buy a hen and give it to them." Bunu's mother came running after them. All of them stopped for a moment.

"Look, sir, the thieves now admit their crime!" the son of Dasa declared proudly. "Return the jewellery you have stolen from our house. These people do not let us live in peace. See how the wife puts the blame on the son to save her husband! You people do not have one iota of shame."

He spat on the ground in utter disgust. The face of Bunu's father looked discoloured and ugly. The policeman gave him a hard blow on the back with his stick, turned to look at Bunu's mother for a brief moment, and then prodded him out of the village.

Bunu stood rooted to the ground, watching the departing trio. He stood there until his father, the policeman, and Dasa's son disappeared from sight. Then he trudged back to the backyard. The hen's head and legs, and a few feathers that the policeman had dug out, lay scattered there. Won't someone bury me in that hole? Bunu thought in utter despair. The chill of an indefinable woe ran through his bones, making him shiver even in the heat of the late morning.

Every morning before getting out of bed, Bunu hoped secretly to see his father sitting on the veranda, slurping tea from an aluminum glass. But the picture of contentment that his hopes painted in his mind never materialized. His mother sat for long hours on the veranda, her sad eyes staring blankly at the street. She did not seem to mind if baby Runu put earth into her mouth; she did not admonish her, nor did she try to scoop it out of her mouth. Bunu did not ask his mother for food even if he was hungry. He could manage with just gruel twice a day. A hunger of a different kind, much more overpowering than the one that his stomach experienced, constantly tormented him. It was the hunger to see his father, to see the return of happiness to his mother's vacant eyes.

"Mother, when will Father return? Shall we go bring him back?" Bunu asked his mother some days later.

"Who knows?" The reply, lifeless and flat, was heaved out of Mother along with a deep sigh. She did not look at Bunu.

"Let us go to the police station. I shall urge the police to release Father. I shall tell them that I stole the hen and they should put me behind bars instead of my father." Bunu's tone sounded serious.

"It would be no use. Pradhan Bhai said they have arrested your father for stealing the jewellery from the Dasa house. He was saying that the police have beaten him . . ." Mother's voice choked. She could not speak anymore.

"Mother, I'll go. I'll tell them the truth," Bunu said with determination.

"Never!" Mother snapped. "Don't you dare do anything of the kind. Haven't you already done enough? You want to go to prison and add to



it? Let that thought go out of your mind.” Bunu could sense the impotent rage that smouldered inside her. His eyes filled with tears. He slumped on the floor and sobbed loudly for a long time, hiding his face between his knees. Neither Manu nor Sanu were with him as he cried to his heart’s content.

That morning, Bunu was busy fetching water from the well. As he brought the last bucket of water, Bunu noticed that his maternal uncle had arrived. He was talking to his mother, sitting on the outside veranda.

“There comes Bunu. He has become quite sensible, it seems.” His uncle said as he fondly stroked Bunu’s head. Mother did not say anything. Something inside Bunu had kept on telling him that Mother was angry with him, ever since the day the police had arrested his father—even though she did not express it openly.

“Bunu, you’ll come with me,” his uncle said. “You have stopped going to school. You cannot carry on with your studies in this place. You can go to school and study when you live with your aunt and me.” His uncle continued to caress Bunu’s hair.

The bewildered Bunu looked at his mother as if to find an answer to this mystery in her face. Father was not there—how could Bunu leave for his uncle’s house at this hour of crisis? Mother used to tell him often that he had become a big boy. How could Bunu go away when he had the responsibility of taking care of his younger brother and sisters in the absence of his father? But his mother did not look at Bunu’s questioning eyes. It was as though she had taken a vow not to do that.

“Here there is not enough food for all of you. This boy does not even have a good shirt and pair of trousers. What would he gain living here like an urchin?” Uncle appeared to be speaking to himself.

That, in fact, was true, Bunu agreed inside his heart. There was nothing much to eat at home. Earlier, they had barely been able to get by on Father’s wages, and things had become worse in his absence. Bunu himself, his mother, and his brother and sisters were beginning to look pale and wan, as if all their vitality had deserted them. Their hair looked dry and lustreless for want of oil. Probably Mother was sending him away because Bunu would get good food and clothes at his uncle’s home; he would start going to school again there, Bunu concluded. Could Mother be so concerned about a wretch of a son like him? Bunu’s eyes filled with tears.

"Let Father return. I'll go after that," Bunu said, as if he had made up his mind.

"No excuses! Get ready quickly," Mother said in a waspish tone.

"Yes, yes, get ready now. Your aunt has been left alone at home with our one-and-a-half-year-old daughter. The baby does not allow her even a moment's respite. Your aunt repeatedly asked me to hurry back." Bunu's uncle rose to his feet.

Was Mother driving him away? Was this the way she wanted to punish Bunu because he had been responsible for sending Father to jail? Bunu wanted to cry out at the top of his voice, but he could not. Instead, he walked inside with weary steps, took out the threadbare sling bag he used to carry to school, squeezed a torn shirt and pair of trousers into it, and came outside. A sob stuck in his throat and choked him. He did not meet anyone or say goodbye to anybody, not even to Manu or Sanu. He did not give a goodbye kiss to little Runu, cradled in Mother's arms. He just walked behind his uncle out of the house without raising his eyes from the ground. He looked at his mother out of the corner of his eye as he crossed her path and had a glimpse of her feet and the lower border of her soiled sari just above them.

Bunu turned and looked back at his home when he reached the temple at the outer bounds of the village. His mother was standing at the front door with Runu in her arms, but he could not see her clearly. Runu seemed to be leaning out a little. They looked like an indistinct picture from a distance.

Bunu's appetite, which had disappeared somewhere, seemed to return after he went to his uncle's house. Here, he got food three times a day and in greater quantity. He had heard from his mother earlier that they ate well at his uncle's. Bunu's uncle, though, had not gotten Bunu admitted to school. Six months have already gone by, his uncle explained. It wouldn't be easy for Bunu to cope with his studies in the limited time that remained. It would be better for him to get readmitted into Class 3 next year and start afresh. Until then, he could study at home.

It would have been a welcome idea were Bunu at home. Back there, Bunu had always wanted to skip school. But here it was different. He desperately wanted to escape somewhere for at least a little while. He did not mind going to school, as long as it offered him a little respite from the

loneliness he experienced here. Of course, he did not have much leisure. He had to do most of the housework, such as drawing water from the well, scrubbing and cleaning the utensils, washing clothes, and sweeping and mopping the floor. His uncle kept reminding him that since Aunt was expecting a baby, she couldn't do those heavy chores. But his aunt cleaned and washed the kitchen herself and did not allow Bunu inside it. Bunu had to carry Uncle's little daughter until his aunt was finished her work.

After a few days, Bunu lost interest in eating. He became obsessed with a longing to see his parents and his brother and sisters. Almost every day, Bunu asked his uncle if his father had returned home. He repeatedly told his uncle that he wanted to go back to his village. His uncle would give the same reply every time: Bunu's father had not yet been released from jail, but he would take Bunu back to his village when winter was over.

In the meantime, his aunt gave birth to a son—a pink, chubby baby boy. The pressure on Bunu increased. Every day, he had to wash large piles of baby clothes and soiled diapers. Bunu had no objection to that, but his aunt had recently developed an irritable temper. Even after asking three or four times, Bunu had to wait hours before his aunt gave him food. She scolded Bunu all the time, at the slightest pretext. "The monster! Just gobbling up food and doing nothing! Both the mother and son have the habit of forcing themselves on others . . ."—she would go on and on. Sometimes, when Uncle heard his wife's tantrums, he would try to placate Bunu, saying that her irritability was the after-effect of childbirth and he should not take it seriously. But Bunu had lost interest in everything. He missed his home, the backyard where he played, the narrow footpath between the paddy fields, and his village, which was not at all like the small town where his uncle lived.

One day, Pradhan Uncle came from his village to Bunu's uncle's house. They talked in low voices. Bunu's uncle called his wife and whispered something in her ear; aloud, he asked her to fetch two glasses of sorbet. Then he dressed hurriedly and went out with Pradhan Uncle. His aunt kept going in and out of the house; she spat on her two children time and again, muttering to herself: "Oh my God! The foolish woman! What a hideous thing she has done . . .!"

Bunu's uncle did not return that night. Aunt asked Bunu to sleep on the outer veranda and keep watch, but he could not sleep much. An

uneasiness he was not able to define haunted his mind for most of the night. Uncle returned before sunrise; his hair was dishevelled, and his face looked tired and grim. He walked straight to the well in the courtyard, drew out a few bucketfuls of water, and poured it over himself. Perhaps the sound awakened Bunu's aunt; she came out of the room and went to the well. She, too, took water in her joined palms and splashed it on her body. "Come, draw a bucketful of water from the well and bathe yourself," she said, looking at Bunu.

People began to gather at his uncle's house. Some called Bunu to them and caressed his head. Bunu's young mind tried to analyze what lay behind the mysterious suddenness of things. Finally, Bunu learned that his mother, along with her three children—Manu, Sanu, and Runu—had jumped into the well in the backyard of their house in the dead of night. Their bodies had been hauled out the next morning in the presence of the police. Bunu's father was brought from jail. After completing the necessary formalities, the police handed over the bodies to Father and Uncle. It was nearly midnight by the time the bodies were cremated. Bunu's uncle had returned home early in the morning, after all this was over.

Bunu's aunt and the women of the neighbourhood had begun the ritual of lamentation. Who could Bunu ask about what had happened? What could he say to them? Bunu's uncle wiped his eyes with his napkin from time to time. People around him talked and talked, but Bunu heard nothing. His senses, though they had sharpened in that few months' stay at his uncle's, were not able to take anything in.

His uncle told Bunu that he would take him to his village after three days. Would there be no one at home when Bunu reached there? Bunu's mind refused to believe it. There would be no Sanu at home—Sanu, who used to always get thorough beatings from Mother; nor Manu, his sister who used to dish out sand, flower petals, and pebbles on broken pieces of earthen pots and invite Bunu to eat; nor little Runu, who always leaned out of Mother's arms at the sight of Bunu! None of them would be there! Or Mother either! Something exploded inside Bunu's head. Mother would not be at home! Not today, not tomorrow, not the day on which he would reach home! Never again! How could this be possible? Bunu could not imagine his home without his mother.

The memory of a day in last year's rainy season came back to Bunu. It had been raining hard. His father could not manage to come back from his place of work. The roof of their house had not been thatched for the past two years; rainwater dripped inside their home from the innumerable holes in the roof and ran in rivulets along the walls and the floor. All three of them had sat bundled up in one corner of the house. Mother had spread a tattered blanket over them and sat close by, putting one of her arms around them. Runu, only two months old at the time, trembled with fever in Mother's lap. That entire night, Mother was either mopping the floor, standing up with the baby cradled in her arms, or sitting down by her three children, holding the blanket firmly over them.

It was the fifth day after the death of his mother and his brother and sisters when Bunu and his uncle went to their village. The funeral rites were to be performed that day, Bunu's uncle had told him, as hastily as possible. It was Bunu who had to perform the rites, since the police would not let his father out of jail even for just that one day. He did not have to do much, his uncle said, trying to console him. The priest would do everything, and Bunu would only have to sit. The rites would be over within an hour or so if they got there a little early. They could start back as soon as possible and reach home before sunset. Bunu's uncle kept explaining all the way there.

His home had never looked so unclean and grimy to Bunu; it had never felt so different or so lonely. As soon as they got there, Bunu's uncle urged the priest to begin the funeral rites. The neighbours started to gather at their house when they saw Bunu and his uncle.

And then they began to talk.

"There wasn't much water in that well—the depth would have been just a few feet, and below the water another few feet of mud and slime. How could she have drowned in that? Yes, of course, there was enough water to drown the children."

"Do you think she could have drowned herself to death? She must have squatted in the mud and somehow kept her head immersed in the water until the last breath of life left her body."

"What an instance of cruelty! She could have killed herself if she could not help it, but she should have spared the children. How could be a mother be so ruthless as to kill her own children?"

Bunu heard the sound of someone letting out a deep sigh.

He did not glance at anyone as he entered their one-room house. He could suddenly remember the tender touch of his mother's hand. He remembered the familiar, fond smell of his mother's clothes when she woke Bunu up late in the night and fed him. He looked at the walls and felt as if his mother had drawn the pictures of their distress all over them, and those pictures told Bunu the tale of their woe. They told him how they went without food day after day; how Manu and Sanu could not bear the tyranny of hunger and cried incessantly; how Runu suffered from fever and Mother could not afford to get her medicine; how, in the end, hunger forced them to eat earth and leaves and roots of trees and whatever they could lay their hands on. No shopkeeper, not a single neighbour cared to lend them a few handfuls of rice! Shame forced them to confine themselves to the house. They were ostracized because the police had arrested his father, because his father was in jail, because his father was a thief!

Suddenly, a realization like something sharp and pointed stung Bunu's heart. His father was arrested because Bunu had stolen and killed the hen! Yes, all these things had happened on account of him, Bunu brooded. He was behind this disaster.

With slow, heavy steps, Bunu walked to the well in the backyard. He looked inside. It looked muddy. There was almost no water. The slime and mud hauled out from the well lay here and there. Bunu wondered if the ghosts of his mother, Manu, Sanu, and Runu were there inside the well. No, no—they would not have turned into anything evil like ghosts! They would instead have become spirits, Bunu argued with himself. Could they see him?

"Please, Mother, forgive me. Forgive me, my dear Manu, Sanu, and Runu." Bunu spoke inside his heart. "I am responsible for everything." He waited there for some time, hoping that a spirit might hear him and answer.

"Hey Bunu, where are you? We must finish the work soon and go back. I have developed a cramp in my waist from holding this baby all this time. Bunu, are you coming?" Bunu heard the disgusted, shrill voice of his aunt coming from inside the house.

There was total silence inside the well. The spirits did not reply.

"Coming, Aunt." Bunu looked into the well once more and turned back. Suddenly, he felt his shoulders sagging. Perhaps they drooped under the weight of the sins that had been laid down on them in countless stacks, one above the other, and seemed to touch the sky. The ten-and-a-half-year-old Bunu walked toward the house, dragging one heavy foot after the other.





# *Mother*

Chirashree Indrasingh

Translated by Ajit K. Mukherjee

**L**ance Naik Jayanta Rout, of the 32nd Sikh Regiment, feebly kicked twice at a mound covered by fallen leaves, three feet below the water.

Everything was at a standstill. But the sky above was unusually dark. Angry, rebellious clouds awaiting the final showdown. An imminent storm. A tropical cyclone. The sky looked unrecognizable, like a stranger, and the green earth seemed to have been invaded by outsiders. It was as if the inhabitants of an evil planet had ransacked the peace of the earth. Could this be possible?

For the past three or four days, the sea had been rough and wild. But now the roar had subsided. Had the sea retreated or changed her direction? Who knows?

Less than six months ago, Lance Naik Rout was in the Poonch sector with the indomitable and undaunted Sikh Regiment, climbing steep mountains with a rope tied to his waist. There, under the cover of towering slopes, he had fought hand to hand with the enemy. He had crawled like a snail across snow-covered peaks. He was unaffected by below-zero temperatures. Rather, his blood boiled when he heard the command, "March, march—forward, march!"

For a soldier, a battle is a battle. You have to fight to your last breath—it doesn't matter if others call it a "shadow war." You have to bend and duck your head to dodge passing bullets that almost kiss your eyes. Sometimes, you must throw your body onto the ground and camouflage yourself. You have to ignore your friend, who has been mortally wounded and lies drenched in blood, and march on. There is little hope of retracing your steps. If you do come back that way, you find your wounded colleague, living or dead, and carry him on your shoulders.

The Sikh Regiment had returned victorious from Poonch sector. Jayanta had been wounded in the battle and was on leave to his village after his release from the army hospital. A bullet had been extracted from his leg. His injury was not considered serious, for a soldier. In the hospital, there were many with more grievous injuries. Captain Himmat Singh, twenty-three years old, had been hit by twelve bullets. Lieutenant Kuldeep had lost an eye, and one of his legs had been amputated. Kamal Yadav, from Bihar, lay on his hospital bed singing songs. A bullet had been removed from the right side of his chest. He did not cry out in pain, lest he be looked down upon. It would have been shameful for him.

While dragging himself across the battlefield, Jayanta had beat his own chest. It would be better for him to die in the field than to accept defeat and bite the ground beneath his feet. He would die a hero at least, fighting to his last breath.

But now he was just an ordinary coward. Just a mound of wet sand. No enemy in sight. Only ruins all around.

The cyclone had ended, but that was now meaningless. It had already done its worst. It would have been better if he had been devoured by the monstrous storm. It would have been better if he had disappeared like smoke or fog in the dark, dreary, unruly night. Jayanta's mind was crowded by all these helpless thoughts. Known has become unknown, familiar unfamiliar. He was numb, paralyzed. Where was his home? His village? The altar before his house? Where had they disappeared to? He could not decide whether to keep moving or not.

Suddenly, he stopped, leaning on the stick in his hands. He saw a large storage jar lying under an uprooted tree some two hundred feet tall. Perhaps a newly wedded daughter-in-law had brought some food from her parents' home, and her mother-in-law had had no time to cook it on the

earthen hearth. Where might the jar have been kept? In the kitchen . . . or the granary? Had its contents been intended for her husband's sister's marriage or some other auspicious occasion? The cyclone had dragged it, and many other valuable goods, out of their safe places. These might contain some food, like raw, fried, or flattened rice.

With the help of the stick, Jayanta slowly inched forward, sending ripples through the water all around him. With much difficulty, he was able to get near enough to grab the jar, which sat shining in the dark, murky water. The thought of fried rice reminded him of Arati. She had been without food for three days. He would go back if he could get some food for her. He crouched on the tree to get a grip on the jar. The tips of his fingers were raw from being immersed in water for the past three days.

A huge jar. Its top was well above the water level. He climbed up onto a branch of the fallen tree and peered into it. Instead of being delighted, he shivered. A girl child, about three years old, was curled up inside the jar, sleeping unperturbed. Her thick hair was tied back by a ribbon, and between her eyebrows was a large circle of kohl to ward off evil spirits and their effects. In her red dress, she looked like a dark doll. Jayanta felt a ray of hope. At last, the face of a living human being! The parents must have put their daughter into this large jar before the seawalls crumbled and their home was submerged under water. Jayanta lifted the child out. Her silver armlets and numerous talismans tied in black ribbon clinked and clanked.

But why were the hands of the girl so heavy? Why was her neck so loose, hanging down like a vine? Frightened, Jayanta shouted, "Dear little girl, open your eyes and look up! Look at me!" His fearful cry shook the place. But the girl, who could have filled the empty lap of Arati, was no longer alive. How did she die? When had her end come? There was no one to answer the question.

Jayanta had lost his six-month-old son on the first day of the storm. When the mud seawalls crumbled, he took his uncle—his father's younger brother—on one arm and Arati on the other and led them into their house, which was well constructed, with stone walls. But the roar of the Bay of Bengal could still be heard, five or six kilometres from their village. Soon, water from the sea began rushing into the village. Like the poison created when the gods and demons churned the ocean of milk to

produce the *amrita*, it spread through the whole village, consuming it. There was no Lord Shiva to gulp down the poison and save them. In the great battle between the gods and demons, human beings had no role to play. A man was an insignificant, helpless, pitiable creature, entrapped by the vast waters. He was sinking, lost in the endless ocean. No trace of him.

The victims of the cyclone looked everywhere for a helping hand, but there was none. Bereft of family and relatives, they were enveloped by an all-pervasive dance of death, in which the world and the sky were reeling.

Jayanta had carried Arati over to the stone wall. Because flooding water would overpower her, he tied her to a palm tree that had been uprooted by the deadly storm and had fallen on the wall. Uncle was standing near another wall, with Jayanta's son in his arms.

His uncle and son were already waist-deep in the water when Jayanta plunged in to save them. In the driving rain and lightning, he struggled to reach them. He held onto them with all his strength and had almost lifted them from the water onto the stone wall when suddenly his wounded leg gave way. It snapped like dead bamboo. For a moment, his grip loosened, and his uncle and son fell into the water and were swept away by the mighty waves of the sea. Within the blink of an eye, they disappeared.

Amid incessant rain and wind, Jayanta was searching for two generations—the one before him and the one after him, his uncle and his son. In his search, he was carried fifty feet away, from land into water. He saved himself by climbing a hillock and holding onto a half-broken palm tree.

Arati drifted in and out of consciousness. She was all alone, tied to the tree. After the storm let up, Jayanta returned. He untied her and lifted her down. Arati sat with her back to the wall, her tear-filled eyes more terrible to behold than the storm-tossed sky. For some time, Jayanta held her to his breast. He caressed and kissed his wife, who had lost her son. They sat holding one another. They did not utter a word. After some time, she pressed her breasts with her own hands and moaned.

After searching for a long time, Jayanta at last spotted a small clay pot floating not far away. He quickly grabbed it, in hopes of offering some food to Arati. Inside it, he found soaked and swollen green grain. It was the only food he could give her. He collected the rainwater in a plastic bag, the one household article he had. Both drank the water from the bag after filtering it through his torn clothes.

The main part of the village was about one and a half kilometres from the new house. Jayanta's parents had died long ago. His elder uncle, who had embraced the Mahima faith and become a devotee of Alekha, had shifted his home to this side of the village, nearer to their land. That was just after Jayanta's marriage. The elder uncle had then constructed a new house, with stone walls instead of mud ones. He was solidly built himself, five and a half feet tall. He had planted trees, *brinjals*, and betel plants. He had built a big altar in front of their house. He had also persuaded four more families to move to this side of the village. The cyclone had uprooted all of them and sent them to oblivion.

Jayanta could see that his land was submerged. He caught sight of two dead bodies as he was lifting Arati down from the palm tree. He tried to recognize them, but they were too badly disfigured. By that time, he had seen seven or eight dead cows.

Jayanta could not leave Arati for a moment. The memory of her six-month-old son haunted her.

The roads to the village were washed out. It was difficult to reach it. Trees as much as fifty or a hundred years old had been torn up. Wherever Jayanta looked, he could see nothing but carcasses of animals or human beings. A pungent smell rose from the corpses. Jayanta's wounded right leg had started to swell. His left leg had been pierced by sharp shaft of bamboo. There was no trace of his village. Jayanta looked from side to side, into the distance. Only water, water—nobody was alive. Still, Jayanta shouted out some familiar names. Perhaps somebody might still be living. He shouted, "Jaya is calling you, brother! Answer me if you are alive." But to no avail. His face was a mask of despair. He had fed Arati the soaked and swollen grain he had found yesterday. Bewildered by his own suffering, by the ecstasy of finding Arati alive, and by the gruelling effort to find food for her, he had forgotten even the death of his son.

Jayanta held the unknown girl he had found in the storage jar against his chest. The water had started receding. He started forward, intending to stow the jar in a safe place.

He had participated in immersing the image of goddess Saraswati in water after worshipping her. The image must be left in waist-deep water. Today, he had to bid farewell to this little doll in the water. Tears ran down his cheeks. His heart bled. His whole body was wrenched with pain,

writhing in grief. It was as if his whole existence had been drowned or had been lost in the water. Oh God! Why did you create such a soft and delicate weapon to break man into pieces and mix him with the earth?

Oh, forget it all! Let it be a bad dream, Jayanta thought. In spite of his heavy heart, he approached the jar. Look at what care the mother had taken to make the child a bed to sleep in.

The sun was still high in the sky. There was time to dry Arati's saris. In such a terrible time, one cannot afford to throw away even a length of thread. Jayanta could not believe his eyes when he lifted a corner of one of the saris. He found flattened rice falling out—the corner was loosely knotted. He quickly collected the rice and bundled it up for Arati to eat later.

A helicopter hovered above his head. Jayanta felt relief. He ran toward his home, not fearing the water and mud.

Now food would be dropped from the sky. Relief would come. A rescue party would soon appear. A VIP would arrive. Everything was not lost, Jayanta thought. He heard the siren: "March, march—forward, march!"

He fashioned a pole from bamboo. He tied a red napkin to one end and lifted the other, waving it for some time. The rescue party failed to notice the red napkin. Jayanta thought, Tomorrow, they will notice me. The water was gradually receding. The next day, he would make a raft by joining banana trunks together. He prayed for the night to be over.

Night makes one lonely, weak, and emotional.

Lance Naik Jayanta Rout of the 32nd Sikh Regiment lay on a mat made from dry straw and the branches of a coconut tree. His head was in the lap of his wife, Arati. He had not eaten anything for four days. He had drunk only water. Hunger had almost paralyzed him. How long could his body of flesh and blood withstand hunger? He had tried, for the past two days, to speak some words of solace to Arati, but he could no longer do it. His body could no longer help him.

The gnawing hunger blinded him. Everything looked dark. He would die if he did not eat something. He knew it.

Arati could feel that it was not the fever but hunger that had paralyzed Jayanta. She swallowed hard and asked, "Why did you tell me lies, Jayanta? Why? That you had eaten the flattened rice? Why, dear?" Her voice trembled. There was no answer. Jayanta merely curled up tighter in Arati's lap.

Arati had lost the son she had been breastfeeding. Dreary darkness, along with the black water of the sea. Where was her little one? Who had snatched him from her? She felt a terrible pain in her chest. Despite the pain, she was overwhelmed with a mother's warmth. The mother in her was looking for her unfed child. Her breasts were overflowing with milk.

Jayanta was severely lashed by hunger. He was without nails, without claws, without feet. He had nothing. He was left with no strength, no resilience. He lay there like an innocent child, like a breastfed baby. Terrible hunger had squeezed every drop of blood from him. For his bare life, he held onto Arati, like a child clinging to its mother.

Arati lifted the child and brought his mouth to her nipple, from which the elixir of life was oozing drop by drop. The unflinching and bounteous love of a mother gradually parted Jayanta's closed lips. His face was wreathed in smiles. Life flowed into his veins. Jayanta looked up. A dauntless soldier kneeling down before a mother.





## *Four Microstories*

Pallavi Nayak

Translated by Supriya Kar

### **The Lucky Woman**

Two friends run into one another at the Bhubaneswar railway station after many years. They hug each other tightly for several minutes. They were classmates at school, college, and university.

“You haven’t changed at all,” the slightly plump one observes.

“But you’ve put on a little weight,” the other friend replies. They start to catch up.

“So how is life?”

“The usual. There’s no relief from the daily grind. You know how things are for a housewife. But you’re lucky. You’ve got a job. You’ve got freedom.”

“Oh, no. The working wife has it harder. You’ve got to go to work and look after the family, too. What does freedom give you? The family is interested in nothing but your salary. You’re the lucky one.”

God knows what she understood from what the two friends were saying, but a madwoman standing nearby, wrapped up in coarse jute, says, “I’m the lucky woman.”

### **The Forgiving Wife**

"Suruchi . . . You're a noble soul. You're incomparable. Full of forgiveness. You forgive a beast like me and come back . . . How can I ever thank you?" Atul's words sounded like the canned dialogue of a cheap melodrama.

Suruchi clenched her teeth, suppressing her anger.

"Yes, I've come back. I had to . . . to secure my son's future. I can never forgive you, Atul Samantaray. Because you don't deserve forgiveness."

Could Suruchi utter these words? Her lips parted slightly, in silence.

### **The Rains**

The rains. Not untimely rain, not sudden rain. Monsoon rain.

The touch of the first monsoon, like the stirring of first love.

Krishna opened the windows. On the other side of the window, the rains . . . a melodious rain.

"Come, let's get drenched." The clouds called her, the rains called her, the winds called her, and the lightning called her. And so did the rain-drenched grass, the leaves, and the coquettish flowers.

"No," Krishna shook her head.

"Why, are you a girl who doesn't love the rains?"

Krishna broke into a smile and said, "Would you wrap me in a veil of love like he does after I get drenched?"

"No, all we know how to do is drench you. You'd better wait for him and enjoy a tryst in the rain together," replied the clouds, the grass, the leaves, and the flowers.

The music of rain carried on.

### **The Mirage**

"That was a day of Chaitra. In your eyes, I had seen a glimpse of my devastation."

You borrowed these lines from Bibhuti Pattnaik's novel and wrote them to me in a letter. Why? When we met, was it the season of spring, the month of Chaitra?

Did the spring breeze pour the perfume of daisies over us?

Our eyes met. Amid hundreds of faces, I could see only yours, dazzling against a procession of stars. Maybe what you saw in my eyes was devastation, but I saw myself in your eyes.

I blossomed at your touch. It was as though I was brushed by a vermilion powder. I glowed pink. The flame trees were laden with flowers, no leaves left on their boughs; the golden shower smiled bashfully, the flame of the forest caught fire. I burned in that fire. But that burning never seemed destructive.

And yet see what a wreck everything is now. The season filled with you said farewell. The green, tender earth turned rough and grey. The sun burned away all the tender dream flowers. Alone, I walked in bare feet on the scalding riverbed. There was no water, no boat, no boatman. My throat was dry. I felt like I would die of thirst.

But whose faint shadow fell across the distant horizon? My feet picked up speed.



# *Droplets of Memories*

Deepsha Rath

Translated by Khusi Pattanayak

## **Droplet 1**

It rained last night. It rained and rained. I could hear those tinkling voices. Surrounded by those voices, I missed you. Amid the tinkling of rain and the whiff of cold air, you said you were far away from me. Yet that rain had been the thread between us, keeping us connected. These thoughts made me feel as though some words were coming from some distant planet, as though those words were synonyms of your name. You were melting into the pitter-patter of droplets that were hitting the floor. I kept wondering—if I was there or you were here . . . then maybe . . . It was just the way this cloudy, windy night was playing with my imagination. My heart wished that we could enjoy every such rainy night under the various skies above the earth. Meanwhile, a hand drew the curtains to give protection from the water-soaked night that was entering through the window.

## **Droplet 2**

Long ago, she had detached herself from the characters of her story. She did not long to see her reflection in his lines of poetry. They survived face to face at the dinner table. Spoons and forks, a calculator for determining

car payments or laundry bills. They had figured out that understanding each other wasn't that easy any longer. The day she had tossed the calculator onto the table and rushed to the wash basin to throw up, that day they had realized that their story and poetry, hand in hand, had created an unconventional lullaby.

### **Droplet 3**

She no longer regrets the dangling breasts on her thin frame. Nor does he feel bereaved about the medals that once adorned his narrow chest. Both have different lives, individual dreams. They have not bothered to remember each other's bedroom address. Yet in those rare moments when they cling to each other through time, they realize that to have a complete story, one doesn't require a flawless character.

### **Droplet 4**

He helps her tie her backless blouse. He helps her sit in the wheelchair. Before leaving the house, he sprinkles pepper and chili powder in her chicken soup and kisses her forehead while running his fingers through her thick dark hair. For this fleeting beautiful moment, she thanks God for her beauty and accomplishments. And because of this, every day on her way home, she buys half a kilo of chicken.

### **Droplet 5**

She touched his neck with her coloured palm. Her hands held the magic of the potter making a clay pot. She was a deft artist. Her soft touch filled his body with blue colour. And in a soft voice he said, "Let it be! Life isn't only a love poem."

### **Droplet 6**

Shoving the toast into her mouth, she walked awkwardly in her six-and-a-half-inch stilettos. She poured all the darkness within her into the coffee mug. The steeliness of the spoon accentuated the bitterness of the coffee. The sky, spread over the balcony like handmade paper, was longing for the stroke of cloud. She told herself that this was the appropriate time to hang a "To let" sign in her heart.

## *About the Contributors*

### **Editors**

Valerie Henitiuk is a professor at MacEwan University, in Edmonton, Alberta, where she is also executive director of the Centre for the Advancement of Faculty Excellence and university advisor for Indigenous initiatives. Until 2013, she was director of the British Centre for Literary Translation, based at the University of East Anglia. Her books include *A Literature of Restitution: Critical Essays on W. G. Sebald* (coedited with Jeannette Baxter and Ben Hutchinson; Manchester University Press, 2013), *Worlding Sei Shônagon: The Pillow Book in Translation* (University of Ottawa Press, 2012), and *Embodied Boundaries: Images of Liminality in a Selection of Women-Authored Courtship Narratives* (Gateway Press, 2007). She has published articles in such journals as the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, *Comparative Literature Studies*, *Meta*, *TTR*, and *World Literature Today*, as well as chapters in many collected volumes, including *Translation and Academic Journals: The Evolving Landscape of Scholarly Publishing* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), *A Companion to Translation Studies* (John Wiley and Sons, 2014), and *Translating Women* (University of Ottawa Press, 2011). Since 2011, she has been editor-in-chief of the Routledge journal *Translation Studies*.

Supriya Kar, PhD, is an editor and translator from Bhubaneswar, Odisha. She received the Charles Wallace India Trust Fellowship in Literary Translation in 2009, with a residency at the British Centre for Literary

Translation. She has also received a junior fellowship from the Ministry of Culture, Government of India; an SRTT Library fellowship from the School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University; and a membership from Wolfson College, University of Cambridge for her study on life writing. Her translations include Odia classics such as Upendra Kishore Das's novel, *Malajahna (The Dying Moon; Rupantar, 2006)*, and one of Mohapatra Nilamoni Sahoo's collection of short stories *Abhisapta Gandharva (The Fallen Gandharva and Other Stories; Odisha Sahitya Akademi, 2016)*. She is also the translator of Mamata Dash's "The Lotus Man" and Pallavi Nayak's "Microstories," in the present collection. She was formerly an editor with Cambridge University Press India.

## Authors

Mamata Dash (b. 1947) writes fiction and nonfiction in Odia and translates from several languages into Odia. Her notable books include *Raaga Lalita*, *Ujjala upabana*, and *Anya jagatara sakala*. She has also translated the works of the early-twentieth-century poet Sri Aurobindo from English to Odia. In 1987, Dash was the recipient of the Odisha Sahitya Akademi Award. She often writes about primal bonds, love and sexual desire, and the disadvantaged and marginalized.

Banaja Devi (b. 1941) is a homemaker who lives in Bhubaneswar. Her noteworthy publications include *Radha*, *Belabhumii*, *Marujharana*, and *Ketoti sabujapatra*. She received the Odisha Sahitya Akademi Award in 2001. Her novels and short stories blend romance (favourite themes include the perils of innocence and its loss) with comedy and satire, sometimes with hints of the supernatural and the metaphysical.

Premalata Devi (b. 1944) has taught Odia literature at a number of colleges in Odisha. She has to her credit two short story collections, *Punascha andhara* and *Kie bujhe kahaku*; two anthologies of poems, *Prathama swakhyara* and *Nishabda juara*; and two collections of essays, *Saraswata samalochana* and *Sabujaru dhusara palli*. Awards received include the Rastraduta (1988), the Varta-Urmi (1989), and the Utkala Bharati Kuntala Kumari Puraskara



(2008). She is currently vice-president of Lekhika Sahitya Sansad, the Odisha women writers' association. Devi frequently writes about the complexities of modern life and a society undergoing tremendous change.

Sushila Devi (dates unknown) published "Manisa Semane" ("They Too Are Human") in the journal *Shankha* in the summer of 1947. Her writings frequently deal with the themes of communal harmony and family values.

Chirashree Indrasingh (b. 1966) teaches at the Udayanath College of Science and Technology, Odisha. Her publications include *Bengabati katha*, *Utiani sanja*, and *Aparichita*, and among the awards she has received are the Supriti Devi Gantayat Smruti Puraskar (1988) and the Sucharita Galpa Puraskar (1998). Her writings combine psychological insight and social realism.

Mona Lisa Jena (b. 1964) is the author of several books, including two collections of short stories and three books of poems. She has translated nine books from Assamese into Odia and, in 2007, received the Odisha Sahitya Akademi Award for translation. Her English translation of contemporary Odia short stories, *Dasuram's Script* (Harper Perennial), appeared in 2013. As a writer, she reflects on the ecstasy and effervescence of romantic love, as well as human relationships and their bittersweet moments. With her skilful use of the first-person voice and her deft handling of varied moods and emotions, Jena displays a profound sense of belonging to a world that is simultaneously intimate and distant.

Golap Manjari Kar (b. 1949) has penned two novels and six collections of short stories. She received the Sucharita Award in 1996 and the Bhubaneswar Book Fair Award in 1997. She is treasurer of Lekhika Sahitya Sansad, the Odisha women writers' association. Her stories display unexpected dramatizations of human situations, with attention to gender issues and to the misuse of power.

Suprabha Kar (dates unknown) taught at the Ravenshaw Girls' School, in Cuttack, and was a strong proponent of women's education, which she saw as essential to women's empowerment. She was a frequent

contributor to contemporary literary journals, including *Utkal Sahitya*, for which she regularly wrote a column.

Gayatri Basu Mallik (1930–2013) began her writing career in 1965. Her publications include *Padmatola*, *Kaveri*, and *Sata sagara tera nadi pare*. Among her awards are the State Level Film Award for Best Story (1985) and the Odisha Sahitya Akademi Award (1994). Mallik is distinguished by her exploration of the feminine psyche and her delineation of memorable women characters.

Sanghamitra Mishra (b. 1953) was a professor of Odia literature at Utkal University, Bhubaneswar, Odisha. She writes poetry, short stories, plays, and criticism and is the recipient of several prizes, including the Odisha Sahitya Akademi Award. Her books include *Galpaganga*, *Mamatara upapadya*, and *Nataka parampara o paribhasha*. Typically, Mishra's fiction is closely bound up with reportage of the actual world and is structured around neighbourhoods, social problems, or people who live on the margins of society.

Yashodhara Mishra (b. 1951) taught English literature and was the guest-editor of the Sahitya Akademi's literary journal, *Indian Literature*. Her story collections include *Dweepa o anyanya galpa*, *Jahnarati*, *Dekhanahari*, and *Rekhachitra*, and she has received both the Katha and the Odisha Sahitya Akademi awards. She has been particularly praised for her short stories about the Indian middle class, especially women, which reveal a keen capacity for observation and are distinguished by clarity, precision, and simplicity, along with an originality of language and imagery. Her stories depict women struggling to cope with quintessentially modern issues such as women entering the workforce and society's changing attitudes toward sex and divorce.

Binapani Mohanty (b. 1936), now retired, was a professor of economics. A prolific writer, she is the author of many notable publications, including *Nabatarang*, *Kunti kuntala Shakuntala*, and *Pata dei*. She has received the Central Sahitya Akademi Award (1990), the Odisha Sahitya Akademi Award (1970), and the Sarala Award (2010). She is president of Lekhika

Sahitya Sansad, the Odisha women writers' association. Most of her writings are concerned with issues of social justice such as poverty and mental illness, with a particular focus on women's lives.

Archana Nayak (b. 1947), who holds a PhD from Utkal University, teaches Odia literature and is an All India Radio singer. Her publications include *Kete drushya*, *Aranya abhisara*, *Anya nayaika*, and *Jahnarati barsharati*. She has received a number of awards for her writing: the Prajatantra Puraskar (1969 and 1970), the Gokarnika Puraskar (1988), and the Rashtriya Mahila Sansthan (1996). Nayak frequently addresses issues of poverty, gender, and relationships in her writing.

Pallavi Nayak (b. 1979) is a deputy collector at Mayurbhanj Collectorate, in Odisha. Her poems and short stories have been published in Odisha's leading newspapers and journals, such as *Samaja*, *Sambad*, *Jhankar*, *Katha*, and *Amrutayana*. In 2014, she received the Anandapur Saraswata Kabita Samman Award. Her microstories are like sparkling gems, chiselled with care, and possess an alluring charm. Nayak's combination of lyricism and romanticism transports readers to a dream world of imagination.

Supriya Panda (b. 1957) is a short story author and playwright whose publications include *Nirvan*, *Nishanta*, and *Mugdhanadi*. She works as head of material management at KIIT University, in Bhubaneswar. A master storyteller, Panda uses her writing to convey a subtle sense of beauty, a deep and empathetic grasp of reality, and an unfaltering trust in humanity.

Basanta Kumari Patnaik (1923–2012) earned her MA in economics from Ravenshaw College, Cuttack. With her brother, she established the publishing firm Shanti Nibas Bani Mandira, which operated from 1959 to 1962. The three novels that established her reputation as a major writer of fiction are *Amada bata*, *Chorabali*, and *Alibha chita*. She is the first and only Odia woman writer to have received the Atibadi Puraskara, Odisha's highest literary award. Her writings display an extraordinary command of Odia idiom, meticulously constructed plots, and a deep understanding of the domestic and social world of twentieth-century Odisha.

Binodini Patra (b. 1951) is retired from the Odisha Education Service and lives in Bhubaneswar. Her publications include *Tuma pratikshare nishidina* and *Kuna paain kabita*. She uncompromisingly confronts cultural notions of gender identity, sexuality, and religion.

Aratibala Prusty (b. 1952) teaches botany at Pranath College, Khurda, and lives in Bhubaneswar. Her publications include *Budi jauthiba swapna ketoti* and, in the science fiction genre, *Paribesha mela* and *Gachhalatara sansara*. Many of her writings explore human disappointment, anger, and confusion about broader social values and situations.

Deepsha Rath (1982–2015) held a BTech degree and wrote in both Odia and English. Her writings have been published in leading newspapers such as the *Indian Express* and *The Hindu*. Rath's gift lay in capturing the fleeting moments of joy and happiness in an apathetic world.

Susmita Rath (b. 1952) is a homemaker living in Cuttack. She has to her credit a collection of short stories, *Hajila jahnara chhai*. Her writings are realistic representations of the lives of middle-class women in Odisha caught up in life's daily struggles.

Pratibha Ray (b. 1944) holds a master's degree in education and a PhD in educational psychology. Her widely acclaimed books include *Yajnaseni*, *Magna mati*, *Adi bhumi*, *Moksha*, and *Shilapadma*. She received the Odisha Sahitya Akademi Award in 1985, the Sarala Award in 1990, and the Moorti Devi Award in 1991. In 2007, the Government of India conferred the prestigious national Padmashree Award on Ray for her contribution to literature. Ray's writings display an awareness of Indian culture and mythology and focus on the poor, the downtrodden, and those living on the edge.

Reba Ray (1875–1957) was an educator, writer, and editor, as well as the founder of *Asha*, the first women's magazine in Odisha. Her story "Sanyasi" ("The Mendicant"), which was published in volume three of *Utkal Sahitya* in 1899, was the first Odia short story written by a woman to appear in print. Her work firmly expresses her social commitment and often contains a strong philosophical element.

Sanjukta Rout (b. 1950) is a teacher of English and lives in Kendrapada. She is author of *Mukta bihanga*, *Jeunthi arambha seithi sesh*, and *Nibuja ghara*, among other publications. The awards she has received include the Ajikali Galpa Samman, the Birupa Sahitya Sanskruti Anusthan, and the Rashtraduta Galpa Samman. Her plots and characters are drawn from her immediate surroundings, detailing the experiences of deprivation, violence, and rejection, as well as the struggle to survive financially and emotionally.

Sarojini Sahoo (b. 1956) teaches at a college in Belpahar, Jharsuguda. Her publications include *Sukhara muhanmuhi*, *Dukha apramita*, *Upanibesh*, and *Gambhiri ghara*, and both the Jhankar Award (1992) and the Odisha Sahitya Akademi Award (1993) have been conferred upon her. A formidable writer, Sahoo deftly portrays the intimate psychological worlds of women, gender identity, and the female experience of sexual and physical subordination.

Paramita Satpathy (b. 1965) received her master's in economics from Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi and is currently additional commissioner of income tax with the Indian Revenue Service. Her publications include *Birala rupaka*, *Vividha aswapna*, and *Bhasakhara*. She received the Bhubaneswar Book Fair Award in 2001, the Bharatiya Bhasha Parishad Yuva Puraskar Award in 2003, and the Odisha Sahitya Akademi Award in 2006. A chronicler of the rising expectations of the twenty-first-century woman, Satpathy persistently experiments with techniques of allusion, symbolism, and the contradiction of realistic expectations.

Gayatri Sharaf (b. 1952) is a teacher who lives in Bolangir. She writes poetry and fiction. Her publications include *Alokita andhakar*, *Aainara janha*, and *Nijaswa basanta*, and she has been awarded the Bisuba Puraskar. Sharaf is a prolific writer whose work, ranging over many genres, is noted for its emotional intensity, satiric wit, and understated irony.

## Translators

**Madhumita Chanda**, PhD, teaches in the Department of English at Maulana Azad College and in the Department of Comparative Language and Literature at Calcutta University. She has published a book on translation theory and practice, along with numerous research papers, in various journals, on comparative literature and contemporary translation theories. Chanda translated Jayanta Mahapatra's autobiography, *Bhoro motiro kanophoolo*, into Bengali. Her areas of specialization are translation studies and comparative literature.

**Bikram K. Das** is a linguist, translator, and lexicographer from Bhubaneswar, Odisha. He was a professor at CIEFL, Hyderabad, and the National Institute of English in Singapore. He won the Central Sahitya Akademi Award for English translation for Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja* in 1989. His translations include Gopinath Mohanty's *The Survivor* (Macmillan, 1995) and Pratibha Ray's *The Primal Land* (Orient Longman, 2001). He was a member of the editorial board of *WordMaster: Learner's Dictionary of Modern English* (Orient BlackSwan, 2009).

**Snehaprava Das** has retired from the Odisha Education Service. She co-translated *Padmamali* (Grassroots, 2005), the first novel written in Odia, into English. Her other translations include Baishnab Charan Das's *The World Within* (Rupantar, 2007), Ramsankar Ray's *Bibasini: A Historical Romance* (Rupantar, 2010), and Manoj Kumar Panda's *One Hundred Days in the Refrigerator* (Speaking Tiger, 2016).

**Mona Lisa Jena**. Her biography can be found in the "Authors" section.

**Ashok K. Mohanty** was a professor in the Department of Business Administration at Berhampur University. His translations include Dash Benhur's *Alms and Other Stories* (Rupantar, 2007) and Susmita Rath's *Colours of Memory* (Rupantar, 2010). He has also translated Binapani Mohanty's *Pata dei* (Sahitya Akademi, 2005) into English.

Sachidananda Mohanty is vice chancellor of the Central University of Koraput, in Odisha. He is the editor of *Early Women's Writings in Orissa, 1898–1950: A Lost Tradition* (Sage, 2005) and the author of *Gender and Cultural Identity in Colonial Orissa* (Orient Longman, 2008). He won the Katha Translation Award in 1992.

K. K. Mohapatra, writer and translator, has published a novel, two collections of short stories, and a book of essays in Odia. He has translated selected works by Isaac Bashevis Singer, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Gabriel García Márquez into Odia. He has also collaborated with Leelawati Mohapatra and Paul St. Pierre on a number of translations into English, notably *Ants, Ghosts, and Whispering Trees: An Anthology of Oriya Short Stories* (2003) and *Gopinath Mohanty: Dark Loneliness* (2014).

Ajit K. Mukherjee retired from the Odisha Education Service after teaching English in a number of colleges in Odisha. His scholarly articles and translations have been published in many respected journals.

Chandramoni Narayanaswamy has retired as chairperson of the Odisha Administrative Tribunal. Her publications include *Better Late Than Never*, *Adventures of FUN*, and *Post Office*. She has translated short stories by women writers such as Nandini Satpathy, Archana Nayak, and Binapani Mohanty. In 1999, the Millennium 2000 Medal of Honour was conferred on her by the American Biographical Institute.

Gopa Nayak earned her master's degree in applied linguistics and a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Oxford. Her writings and translations have appeared in journals such as *Muse India*, *Cafe Dissensus*, and *Northeast Review*. At present, she teaches English at O. P. Jindal Global University, in Haryana, India.

Jatindra K. Nayak is professor of English at Utkal University, Odisha. His translations include Fakir Mohan Senapati's *Story of My Life* (Sateertha, 1997), Chandrasekhar Rath's *Astride the Wheel* (Oxford University Press, 2003), and Jagannath Prasad Das's *A Time Elsewhere* (Penguin India, 2010). He won the Katha Translation Award in 1997 and the Hutch Crossword

Indian Fiction Translation Award in 2004. He is the founder and chairperson of the Rupantar Centre for Translation in Bhubaneswar.

Arundhati Patnaik is a translator and painter. She is currently a researcher with the SANDHI project, sponsored by India's Ministry of Human Resources Development, at the Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur, which focuses on creative economies and tourism. Her other interests include photo documentation and photography. She lives in Kharagpur, West Bengal.

Priyadarshi Patnaik, a professor of English at the Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur, West Bengal, is a poet, painter, and photographer. He has published two volumes of poems, and his translations include Bidyut Prabha Devi's *Poems for Children* (Rupantar, 2010).

Khusi Pattanayak, PhD, teaches English at KIIT University, in Bhubaneswar. Her writings and translations have been published in numerous journals, including *India Opines* and *Indian Literature*.

Sumanyu Satpathy is a professor of English at the University of Delhi. He is one of the editors of *The Tenth Rasa: An Anthology of Indian Nonsense* (Penguin India, 2007) and of *Signifying the Self: Women and Literature* (Macmillan India, 2004), and his translations include *The Voyage Out: Contemporary Oriya Short Stories by Women* (Rupantar, 2007).