

Narratives on Women's Issues Vol 1: Domestic Violence



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Forward

It is with great pleasure, honor and sadness (due to the important but painful subject matter) that the International Human Rights Art Festival presents this collection on domestic violence in India. This powerful volume explores this horrific crime, including several first person accounts. The stories explore the silent predator that is domestic violence. It represents a physical assault that destroys the well-being of victims. All of the pieces are timely, important and very impactful.

India is the second largest country in the world, teeming with different ethnicities, religious practitioners and extremely varied lifestyles. The ten writers featured are based in different regions of the vast land, representing this human array. This variety of views assures inclusiveness among the stories. However, the sad but common thread binding the stories is the misery that women face.

A reading of the stories evinces that domestic violence runs through all social and demographic groups, from domestic worker, to an office worker, to a stay-at-home mother. Some of the victims are affluent, some are poor.

This publication on domestic violence is the first in the series of Narratives on Women's Issues. Please read the book to see how this pernicious behavior affects these women, who are blameless and often without recourse.

Special thanks to Shashi Kadapa, the IHRAF International Fellow 2021, and of course, the writers, who bring this issue to life with such vivid, and painful clarity.

Sincerely,



Tom Block

Executive Director,

International Human Rights Art Festival, NY

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Shashi – Heart breaks for these four women

By Shashi Kadapa

Domestic violence (DV), spousal and intimate partner abuse has become a severe social problem. Domestic violence is the systematic abuse of power. It is the coercion, domination, and intimidation of one person by another through sexual, physical, or emotional means among intimate relationships. The common attribution is that the female is the victim while the husband or intimate partner is the abuser. In this article, I will narrate stories of different perspectives of DV to show that it is pervasive and women are abused, irrespective of their religion, wealth and social position,

Woes of our Savita, our maid servant

Our maid servant Savita bai as we call her slid in quietly when my wife opened the door. Her face was covered in a dupatta (loose upper cloth worn by women to cover their face against the sun and wind). She is usually talkative, filled with vivacious energy, but today she was morose, brooding, and stifling her sobs.

My wife kept quiet not prodding, and waiting for her to speak. It was when Savita bai removed the dupatta to drink tea, that the welts and bruises on her face became evident.

My wife asked, “What happened? Did your husband beat you again?”

“Yes. They wanted money that I was saving for the school fees. When I did not give, they beat me.”

In India, women refer to their husbands or elders in the third person ‘they’ and not ‘he’ or ‘him’.

“Savita bai, why don't you complain to the police?”

“Last time I did. The police thrashed and kept them in the lock up. They released them after I requested the police inspector Sahib. They came back and again beat me.”

“Why did you request the police to release him? You should have let him rot in jail. Maybe you should leave him.”

“No tai (sister). Who will protect me and my daughters in the slum if they are not there? Whatever he is, he is my husband.”

She paused and added, “Other women in our slum object to a single woman. They feel that I will attract their husbands.”

A few months passed by and one night, the doorbell rang. We opened the door and Savita bai was standing along with her uncle.

My wife called her inside and asked, “What is the problem? It is so late.”

“Tai, I told you the other day that my daughter Ahilya is getting married.”

“Yes. I remember. I have promised that I will give money.”

“No Tai. I have not come for the money.”

She held out a pishwi, cloth bag and said, “Tai, these are the ornaments and money I collected for the wedding. Please keep them with you.”

“Why here?”

“Tai, if I take them home, my husband will steal and sell them and spend the money on liquor and gambling.”

“My God! He wants to steal his daughter's wedding money! He does not have any heart or a soul?”

“Yes Tai. All they want is money for drinking.”

We counted the cash and jewelry sealed the bag and my wife promised that it would be given when Savita asked.

What struck me was that this woman, who slogged for 10-12 hours daily to provide for her family, trusted a stranger with the money, and not her husband.

Her younger daughters go to school, they are doing well, and Savita dotes on them. She hopes that they will work in 'Apice' or office when they grow up, find a good and caring husband. Small people, small dreams that are so difficult to become real.

When we give her snacks and eats, she packs them in a bag to take them home for her daughters. During the Diwali festival when my wife gives her a new sari, her request is always, "Please give some dress material for my daughters. I do not need a sari."

This useless husband had once got into a fight with some other drunks in his slum and was thrashed soundly. Savita could have left him to bleed. But no, she took care of him, tended to his wounds and nursed him back to health.

His thanks when a recovered was a resounding slap as he shook her and asked for money to buy alcohol.

This fate of domestic maid servants, women laborers, women who live in slums and who work long hours daily is repeated in countless households. With no legal protection and a society that gives a 'macho' image to a wife beater, the life of these women is a continuous tale of beating and drudgery.

Woes of an Rupa, a working woman

Do only illiterate, maid servants face DV? What about educated and employed women who have a chance to walk out of an abusive marriage?

I wish to narrate the harrowing time that Rupa undergoes. She stays in our society, and my wife and her friends came to know about the sad details that I now narrate.

Rupa works in an uptown office in the IT Park. She is from a socially backward community from small village, is educated, and has a good job with sufficient pay. She is a success story of how a small town girl studied, found a job and made a career in a city. When she goes to her village to meet her parents, her neighbors and young girls look up at her with pride.

She has a daughter of about two. She is married to Santosh, who has a similar background and works in the same firm. They were classmates in MBA College, they fell in love and got married. The couple can be considered as a good example of successful working class people. Both earn, they can save, buy an apartment on loan and a car, send the child to a good school, go on annual budget vacations, and lead a happy life. The perfect 'Indian dream'.

Beneath her smile and vivaciousness, she hides a secret. Her husband abuses her.

Every day and night, he taunts, verbally castigates her for her brown skin, he doubts her fidelity, goes through her chat messages, he is sure that she has an affair with multiple partners, and marital rape happens daily.

While he does not beat her, the psychological stress of what she bears, the insults she is forced to listen, the telling effect of the abuse on the baby who cowers in fear as she sees her mother abused, is very tragic. The verbal assault is breaking her down mentally, and she wonders if leaving the job would stop this abuse.

Often I see Rupa in the park with her baby clenched tight to her breast as they comforted each other. She confides in her neighbor Mrs. Deshpande, an old widow, who narrated the exchanges she had with Rupa.

Mrs. Deshpande asked, "Rupa, I daily hear your husband shouting at you. I have a daughter of your age. Do you want to tell me? It helps if you pour out your grief to someone."

"Aayi (mother), my husband is not happy with me."

"Why is that?"

"I am successful at my job. I attend important meetings, the boss always asks for my advice. Santosh is sidelined, he has a low profile job, and he resents this."

"That is his problem."

"Maybe. But, his jealousy at my success is increasing daily. In the office he keeps quiet but after we come home, his rage breaks out."

"Does he drink and beat you?"

"No, he does not drink, and he does not beat me. But, he finds fault with everything I do. The food, my dress, the TV serials I watch, my friends. He thinks I am having an affair with my boss. The boss is my father's age."

"Have you tried to talk with him?"

"Yes. It is of no use. I just hate coming home. Worst is that my baby daughter listens to all of this. She just stares and cries. This tension is horrible."

"Why don't you divorce him?"

“Divorce? This is unthinkable in my middle class family and society. Other men will start eyeing me. Besides, I have two younger sisters. It will be difficult to find husbands for them if the elder sister is divorced.”

This is true to a certain extent. The common belief of men is that divorced single women are ‘always available’ and ‘ready for action’. It is also true to a divorce stigmatizes a woman. Other married women are wary of such single women and fear that they would steal their husbands. Divorcees are looked with suspicion and people feel that ‘there is something wrong with her that is why the husband left her’.

The blame is always on the woman and never on the husband even if he is a wife beater, drunk, and a philandering swine.

“Maybe you should separate?”

“I still love him, and hope he realizes what I am going through.”

“I know some lawyers and the lady police inspector of the local police station. They will talk some sense into him. This cannot go on like this.”

“No Aayi. I will manage.”

Abuse and DV exists, sometimes subtly, sometime overtly. The stigma of becoming a divorcee is real. DV happens even with educated women who have good jobs and a social position.

Woes of Dimple a home maker

In India, we have this craze for a son, who is expected to carry the family name forward, bring dowry, look after the business, and care for the old parents. Daughters are considered a burden, useless things that have to be carefully watched lest they elope

with someone from a lower caste. They have to be married off with dowry, and the family has to cater to the greedy groom's avaricious demands.

This archaic attitude still persists even when Indian girls head multi-national corporations, win Olympic medals, they are skilled doctors, engineers, teachers, soldiers, they pilot fighter jets, command army battalions, some even became chief ministers, and girls excel in everything that men do, and more. However, their achievements are secondary, nothing in front of the son.

Let me tell you the story of Dimple. Everybody in our neighborhood loves Dimple. Married with three children, to an affluent business man, she is always smiling, ready to help, feeds people who visit her home, does not gossip, and even at 35, she has maintained herself. Her vivaciousness and happiness is infectious, and the family lives in a swank 'bangla' independent house with cars, garden, and plenty of stuff that the affluent have.

Inwardly, she is desperate, terror struck with uncertainty, and at times feels like killing herself through self-inflicted guilt for her crime.

Her crime - she has given birth to three daughters.

Her husband and mother-in-law want a son who will manage the business. After the third daughter was born, she has undergone three abortions when the illegal ultrasound scan for gender determination showed that the fetus was a girl. The doctor has warned her that if she undergoes one more abortion, she will face severe dangers and may have to undergo hysterectomy.

Her husband has threatened her that he will abandon her if she delivers another girl. He must have a son. Final!

In spite of the dangers, she wants to go ahead and try one more time, is ready to risk another termination and health for the elusive son. It does not matter if she becomes a wreck, and her three daughters become orphans.

Dimple was good looking, she had fair complexion, and was from a simple and middle class family. When an offer for marriage came during her second year in BA, her parents jumped at the good fortune. She was pulled out of college and married.

The first baby girl was welcomed as Laxmi, the goddess of wealth. The second girl was regarded with anger and the third with open hostility. Her husband and her in-laws did not even come to the hospital to meet her and the baby. She was 'welcomed' with stony silence and scorn.

The greatest enemy of a woman is another woman, often her mother-in-law. This old lady would taunt and insult her at every opportunity. When Dimple announced that she was pregnant, there was skepticism, but Dimple was tolerated.

After 14 weeks, her husband accosted her, "Come, we have to see a doctor?"

"Why? We went three days back?"

"No. This is another specialist doctor."

So she went with him through dingy lanes and run-down buildings, fearful of the rough neighborhood, but trusting her husband. They went into a ramshackle building that had the board of a maternity hospital.

In India, gender determination through ultrasound machines is prohibited by law. Any doctor who is caught performing such tests can be arrested, and the equipment seized. However, such machines are available for illegal testing, and at higher price.

The doctor was shifty eyed, always looking out of the door, dirty, and looked like a goon. She did not like his touch and the way he looked at her.

In the dark room, she could identify an ultrasound machine and winced when the doctor examined her with a probe and all the time stared at the screen. Then he called her husband into a corner and they whispered furtively, glancing now and then at her. The husband paid a fistful of cash, grabbed her by the arm, and they went home.

As she slept, he came into the room along with her mum-in-law who glared at her.

“Great work. You have a girl growing inside you.”

“How nice, I love my daughters.”

“Really? Well we do not. Get ready. We are going to a clinic and abort the thing.”

She looked with tears in her eyes at her husband and implored, “Please. This is our baby. How can you be so heartless?”

“Dimple. I am warning you. Give me a son else I will send you back to your father's home, and find another wife.”

Shivering with tears, she got the abortion done. This has happened three more times. The last time, the doctor warned them, “Dimple. Your uterus has become very weak. If you abort again, then you will bleed continuously, and I will have to remove your uterus.”

She looked at her husband for support but he had turned away in disgust and anger, his mind already made up to abandon her.

So, Dimple now faces continuous abuse, insults, verbal assaults, and she is a psychological wreck. She maintains an outward attitude of happiness and poise.

She is waiting for a son, prays for hours in front of her god to save her marriage, secure her daughters future by giving her a son.

Will god listen? Should he listen to such prayers?

The agony of Salma, second wife

When the offer for marriage was made from Rashid, a small business owner, Salma's parents were happy. She was about 16 and her parents rushed to get the nikah, wedding completed. The business prospered and Rashid now was regarded as a wealthy and important member of the community.

People would come to his house to discuss important matters, to ask for funds, and Salma was the perfect hostess. People never refused second helpings of her mutton kebabs and they drank the sherbet she prepared with gusto. People always respected her and she always had a smile and a nice word for everyone. Blessed with two daughters and a son, she could be considered as an ideal Muslim woman.

When she offers namaz, she has one fervent prayer that she mumbles through her tears. 'Take care of my children and do not throw them out in the streets'.

Why?

Her husband has remarried and has threatened her with the dreaded TTT – triple talaq.

In the Muslim community in India, husbands can divorce their wives by saying 'Talaq' three times. These three words can destroy a wife, throw her in the streets, and she would be destitute. Rashid has told her that if she picks a fight with his new wife, then he will use TTT.

So why did he marry again? Because he could. As per his faith, he man can have four wives, and he can decide what he wants to do with the 'old stock'. His new wife Jamuna is young, nubile, and she is fresh, and is great in bed. In all probability, he will marry again when he tires of his new wife.

They have both moved into what was her exclusive home. He gives Salma and her kids money, a place to live, and her needs are covered. However, she is psychologically devastated, especially when she has to cook for them and hear the noises they make in the night. Rashid insults Salma in front of everyone, is abusive, and rapes her when he wants. Because he can.

And she is forced to acquiesce.

Whom can she turn to? Her community members know about her problem. They pity and sympathize with her, but they cannot interfere. Salma's parents are poor, they have their own problems, and they cannot take her in. People feel that Rashid has done nothing wrong.

So, Salma spends her day cooking, caring for her children, and praying to god to end her misery. She is a mental wreck and only the love for her children has kept her sane.

These stories brought out different perspectives on DV. There was the story of Savita a maid servant who faces abuse from her alcoholic husband. Another story was of Rupa, an educated and employed woman who faces abuse from her jealous husband. The third story was of Dimple from an affluent family who faces abuse as she has given birth to three daughters and not even one son. The story of Salma, the co-wife and her dread

was sad. These stories are repeated in countless homes where insecure husbands blame their wife for their failures. DV is pervasive, insidious, chews away the soul, and leaves the body emotionally drained.



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http://www.activemuse.org/Shashi/Shashi_Pubs.html

Savita - Unsafe home

By Savita Narayan

“A woman called me hurriedly from the roof of the building she lived in after she snuck away from home. Another one spoke softly to me from inside her closet. They said they had no privacy to talk to me. Their houses are small, packed with family members (including their violent spouses), all staying home during the lockdown. There was no other way they could reach out to me about the violence they were undergoing.” Barkha Bajaj tells me during our telephone conversation. Bajaj is the Executive Director at Aks Foundation at Pune, an NGO that works with victims of domestic violence.

And these two women she mentions are the lucky few who could use their phones during the lockdown. Several others approached the police to lodge complaints.

What is domestic violence?

Domestic violence is about power and control over the survivor by the perpetrator. Physical abuse is but one of the many forms of domestic violence. Humiliation, isolation, threats, intimidation can be parts of the combination of abusive behaviour the survivor is subjected to, making her feel helpless and unable to break the chain of escalating abuse. Abuse can be in the form of verbal abuse, financial abuse, emotional violence, sexual violence and neglect. Domestic violence also affects children and others in the family.

Physical domestic violence is rarely a mental illness and is often a learnt behaviour. The cycle of abuse is a repeating pattern often noticed in abusive relationships. It is cyclical with four broad stages -

1. The tension building stage in which the perpetrator becomes increasingly agitated and aggressive. The survivor takes extra care to avoid the explosion from the partner
2. The perpetrator is violent - physically or verbally to control and exert power over the survivor. The survivor may need to protect herself, escape or call for help
3. Honeymoon stage - The violent partner is contrite and apologizes, promising never to be violent again. The survivor feels relieved, accepts the apology, is hopeful about the future of the relationship, questions if maybe she is responsible for the episode
4. Calmness returns to the relationship as if the violence never occurred.

Usually the cycle begins again after some time.

The cycle of violence shows the broad pattern of domestic violence. It is not predictable. Often, as the cycle continues the violence may escalate.

The programme for supporting the survivors of domestic violence at Obuka, Bengaluru is in collaboration with lawyers, counselors, mental health professionals, the police, shelters, mediators and financial organizations. The aim is to bolster the survivor's self worth, and empower her to make informed choices for her life and that of her children says Fiona Martin, a survivor and director. They discuss the survivor's legal rights with her and her options for the future. In the course of building her self confidence she develops strategies in her daily life to eliminate violence. The survivor is empowered to ensure that she remains violence-free now and in the future. Whether the survivor

returns to the relationship or otherwise is her own decision. The intervention is considered successful when there have been no incidents of violence of any sort in the relationship over a period of time.

Domestic violence and the law enforcer

The law in India protects women against domestic violence. Yet, 1 in 3 women experience it. Domestic violence is a human rights violation and is tried under Criminal law. It is also a breach of trust of the first magnitude. The last place one should expect to be assaulted is at home yet intimate, long-term relationships are apparently no barrier for some to assault their partners. A part of the problem is traditional patriarchal mindsets.

Registering a complaint of domestic violence with the police is becoming easier that it was earlier. In some cities in India the survivor meets officials who are sensitized to the issue of domestic violence, and are hence empathetic to the woman who approaches them for help. Women counselors are present in some police stations so that survivors can come there without hesitation for help. The befriender NGOs in the field, the police and allied professionals work together for the survivor. In some other cities, however, the survivor faces prejudice. Although much progress has been achieved by training in gender sensitization and increasing awareness of societal prejudice, there is work to be done.

Several cities in India have had the highest ranked police officials determined to get to the bottom of this issue with all the power of the law and their office. They do make significant progress during their tenure in improving the system and facilitate

prompt response times to distress calls, interaction with victims and counseling of the errant spouse.

Domestic violence has no barriers

Domestic violence is common across income levels, educational proficiency and religious affiliation.

Domestic violence is an occurrence brushed off in households with lower incomes and, paradoxically, in households of high income. It is so endemic and is such a lived experience, perhaps for generations, that it evinces little or no overt reaction. By and large the middle class does not seem as much a prey to this malady, partially perhaps due to more fear of shame and stigma.

Why don't more survivors protest?

The question that then arises is why do survivors put up with the violence? Why don't they just up and leave if it is so unbearable? Why the compulsion to stay and be mauled repeatedly? An anecdote best illustrates the issue here.

A lady employed by my neighbor to assist with household tasks knocked on her door one evening. Her three small children were with her. Her face was discolored, swollen and she wanted to stay the night in the safe environs of my neighbor's home. It transpired she had been thrashed by her husband that evening. As long as his ire was directed only at her she put up with it. But when he turned on the children she decided to move out, and appeared at my neighbor's doorstep. The next morning, as she prepared to leave she assured her employer that she and the children would now be safe. Her husband

would have calmed down by now as she knew from experience. When she was asked why she put up with his repeated atrocious behaviour and did not leave him, her reply was that she needed to stay married to be safe from the other predatory men in the area she lived in. They left her alone now because of her married status. Besides, she said, her husband was not really a bad man. He just had these fits of anger but would cool off after each episode. Until the next one, that is.

The point here is that domestic violence is so normalized that the survivor herself often justifies it. Self-blame and excusing the spouse's behavior is her way of coping. Even educated and economically strong women sometimes use these justifications. What is worse, her children witness this violence in their growing years which impacts their personalities and behavior.

Impact on children of violence at home

The report 'Behind Closed Doors - The impact of domestic violence on children' by UNICEF says that children who witness or are survivors of domestic violence may suffer from severe and lasting effects. They undergo emotional turbulence in childhood and have a high likelihood of becoming perpetrators themselves as adults.

Domestic violence vitiates the atmosphere in a home to an extent that it affects the children of the couple even if they are not directly victimized by the oppressor. They often are unwittingly pitted against one of the parents because of behavior they witness at home. Some counselors I spoke to talked of boys who become overtly aggressive in their behaviour outside the home. Others indulge in copy-cat victimizing other females they interact with - sisters, neighbors, classmates. The behavior often continues into adulthood

and the cycle of violence continues into the families they build with spouses and offspring.

Children in violent homes may have difficulty in coping at school, may be unable to make friends, be withdrawn and uncommunicative, may act out and be destructive, may suffer from anxiety and depression. In short, nearly 40% of children from such homes have unhappy childhoods which could have an impact on the adults they become.

Domestic violence during the COVID pandemic

The general lockdown during the pandemic was exceptional. Never within living memory have entire cities in India, and the world over, been forced to stay indoors in an attempt to break the cycle of infection. The ramifications for distressed economies were job losses, people working longer hours without office time / personal time boundaries, sharp drops in retail sales, entire offices shut and much else.

On the personal front it resulted in lack of privacy, increased housework for women in addition to professional work, children being home 24x7 with no recourse to outdoor play, online classes for students of all age-groups, no social life outside the immediate family and so on.

These living conditions, faced by the whole country, were supposedly reason enough for perpetrators to be violent at home. During the early weeks of the lockdown some of the violence was also seen to be due to the effects of withdrawal with the non-availability of alcohol and drugs. Families had to contend with addicts going through de-addiction and its repercussions. Support for this was not possible to the extent required

with cities under lockdown, and was only on phone and email to those who had access, usually in the bigger cities.

There is an exponential increase in the sheer number of calls and texts received daily from survivors. Domestic violence is truly the 'shadow pandemic'. This is corroborated by UNWomen, the United Nations entity formed in 2010, dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women. It reports that after the start of the pandemic every sort of violence against women and girls has intensified all over the world.

The National Commission for Women is the statutory body of the Government of India concerned with advising it on all policy matters concerning women in India. They have recorded a two-fold increase in calls from victims of domestic violence during the lockdown. A statistical overview of complaints received by them shows that 22.3% of all cases registered in 2020, amounting to 5297 in number, were from women seeking protection from domestic violence.

This number only reflects the number of women who had access to emails, phones and were able to make calls. As it is, even during normal times domestic violence is underreported in India due to lack of access or not knowing whom to contact. As such the figures above are only the tip of the iceberg.

Catch 'em young - stopping domestic violence by sensitizing children

Stopping violent behavior in youngsters is the most effective way forward. Gender sensitization begins with the young, and schools are a great venue to begin. Yet, these efforts for a limited number of hours in a day in school have to combat with

subliminal messages of overt and covert misogyny that the young are bombarded with on media and the internet all the time.

As a basic example, school books showing both sexes involved with housework, child rearing, working in non-traditional areas will normalize the involvement of women in the armed forces and the police, as doctors and engineers and men in cooking, as nursing staff and in the fine arts. Knowing that gender should not stand in the way one chooses to work and live one's life will open the minds of both - girls to aspire to a life that they like, knowing there are really no barriers and boys to know that ability is not gender based.

The way forward

Better implementation of the law on domestic violence is the need of the hour. India is moving forward towards a more understanding and empathetic ecosystem for survivors with gender sensitization programmes for the police, support for survivors with temporary shelters, assistance for survivors with court procedures and much more. Yet, more needs to be done.

Domestic violence is all about power and control. When the survivor is empowered to have control over her life, and the perpetrator is divested of power and no longer has control over the lives of the survivor and her children the opportunities for violence in the home decrease.



Savita Narayan is a freelance writer and the fiction editor of ActiveMuse. She lives in Pune, India with her family. Her articles on Indian history and culture have been published in Heritage India magazine. She has co-authored Navagraha Temples of Tamil Nadu - Kaveri Delta, which encompasses the modes of worship in these ancient temples, their history and culture. Savita has profiled NGOs in MoneyLife magazine. She has written on eco-friendly living, articles for the general reader on a medical website and has reviewed books. She has edited a book on Vaishnavism published privately. She also writes on the craft of writing. Savita is a beta reader of novels and is fiction editor at Active Muse, the online journal of fiction, poetry and art. Her blog Women in Indian History is here -

<https://savitanarayan.blogspot.com>

Links to Savita's articles are here -

<https://savitanarayan.blogspot.com/p/my-published-articles.html>

Chaitali - Two Poems on Domestic Violence

By Chaitali Gawade

In the Wrong

my day staggers under
the weight of blame
I've done it again

birthed a daughter
justly damned
with teeth between her thighs

my hands are tied
for nights pouring
into days
after each birthing

my husband breathed his last
after the cries
of the fourth daughter

I now walk down the streets
of our village
on lazy afternoons
my fingers forgetting their form
are bent in permanent hooks

a few women look away
their own bruises simmering
beneath scabs

and some stare fascinated
as I unfurl my fingers
like answered prayers

Wrong Hero

I'm sorry
I failed to see when love
became hands

hands that taught me
pain has a different size
shape and colour to it
each time

hands that reached me
In the deepest corner
of our house, where I cowered
not making a sound
as I heard little feet
scurrying towards me

I'm sorry

that you didn't want to be
Daddy's girl anymore

I'm sorry
for what you saw
and pretended you didn't



Chaitali is a dreamer who lives in the fictional world of her creations, whenever she can get away from real life. She is the poetry editor with ActiveMuse, a journal of literature. A Pushcart nominee, her poetry has been published by Unbroken Journal, Vagabondage Press, and The Wagon Magazine among others. Check out more of her writerly musings <https://medium.com/@chaitaligawade>

Shagun - Soaring Through Bondage

By Shagun Shukhla

Not all wars leave scars on the soma, some cut through the emotional level and scald the soul. Domestic violence is one such war and whether its victims are men or women, their scars are often for them alone to see. On a warm summer morning, a lone thought floated in the wind and caught fire.

Is there ever redemption possible in cases of domestic violence, even where generations are witness to this soul scorching? In a land that boasts of goddesses in its spiritual texts and powerful women figures in its society, wonder where such lamented souls stand eventually. But then, the theory of survival is built on the strength of hope. It is this sliver of a belief that makes life worth fighting and living for.

Subjugation in Hope

Radha was fair as a crescent moon. Her husband loved tugging on her long plaits whenever he passed her on his way to the terrace above, quietly signaling her to follow him. Clad in a white mulmul sari, she would go sit beside him on the jhulla, a hammock covered with pristine white cotton sheets and white bolsters, humming classical songs popular of her era in her soothing voice. To the family, they looked like a couple deep in love as she deftly broke the supari, a beetal nut, with a sarota, a pair of sharp clippers while he sat gazing at her as the hammock swayed gently in the breeze.

In those days, their wedding had been the talk of the town. Radha was eighth pass, uncommon for a girl in those times, even if from a rich family like hers. Her father

owned lands and his desire was to find a highly educated groom for his dainty daughter. He soon got his wish. Vidyadhar Chowdhary was a renowned Ph.D. scholar with many publications to his credit, teaching in the University.

Though Vidyadhar's family had humble beginnings, he singlehandedly ensured his entire male siblings and cousins settle well in the city away from the sad plight of a village life they once knew. From his personal savings, he constructed a bungalow that boasted of more than two dozen rooms.

Radha came to Vidyadhar's home in a silver carriage, carrying with her many artifacts, jewelry and the finer nuances of a cultured living. Her father had made it clear that she was used to eating in silverware and it was now Vidyadhar's duty to ensure that her life continued as well as it was in her maiden home. All was well. For the time being.

To outshine the sparkle that had always surrounded her in her childhood home, Vidyadhar worked even harder and achieved the high-ranking position of the Dean of his department. None dared disobey him and his word soon became law. While his career peaked, he fell as a person. For him, women were only meant to be a trophy.

Then the children started arriving; after all, Vidyadhar had envisioned a large brood filling the big house he had built. Though his work kept him busy and away from the self-deprecating thoughts, the intimate moments spent with Radha kept the chasm alive. Her noble upbringing was never spoken out loud, but the stark contrast between the two families continued to harp at Vidyadhar's neural dendrites. He never lashed out at her physically. His intimidating voice was enough. He took to voicing his commands loudly at home too. People scurried around whenever they heard his booming baritone.

At first, she disliked that he would suddenly appear and start shouting his commands for all to follow. No television or entertainment when he was around, it corrupted the minds. Only the spiritual discourses were allowed, even for the smaller children who couldn't understand a word of what the Sadhus and Satsangis would preach. He attained a role of benefactor in the society while at home, he was the Hitler.

With time though his fame was rising in the academia, her importance in his life was shrinking. Vidyadhar loved to eat in the silver thaali seated on the dining table but detested being served cold food. Despite the servants running round, he wanted Radha to cook for him and serve all those he chose to bring along for the many impromptu meals he enjoyed celebrating. She obeyed out of love, often squeaking in fright when he would suddenly appear and loudly voice his commands while towering over her.

It was normal behavior for him since she was his favorite doll, always presentable from afar and ready to do anything at his beckoning. For her, it was proving emotionally exhausting. Her cultural upbringing ensured that she would prepare lip-smacking delicacies for the large gatherings, after which she would retire to the room adjoining the large kitchen.

She had converted that small sanctum into a temple where she would quietly sit awaiting her turn to eat the meals after everyone else had eaten. She would get to sit on the dining table and eat in her favorite silverware.... Always in the end and always alone!

All these emotional games started taking its toll on Radha. His detachment was proving to be harsh with time. Continuous child bearing seasons were failing her health. Her metabolism faded and slowly the killer diabetes crept in. Her fair skin would often take on a saintly aura whenever her blood sugar dipped. Her second youngest son,

Madan, the apple of her eyes, would run to fetch her medicine whenever he spotted her being saintly, or actually faintly! Madan was studying to become a doctor, hoping someday to cure his mother of ill health.

Having given up on her own dreams, Radha would often find solace in her son's studious nature and encourage him to do better with his life. She knew that if he stayed in the family, he would turn out to be a puppet to her husband, like all others. She would often voice her thoughts to Malti, her daughter-in-law, as the two women sat under the rooftop canopy where they laid out perfectly rounded urad-dalpapad or papadums on the cot to dry in the hot noon sun.

By the time she turned fifty, Radha had seen two of her children die, one in early infancy and the other due to a fever outbreak. All her other children were married off with families of their own, except her favorite, Madan. Though he had married a girl he immensely liked, he was yet to be blessed with a child.

Somehow knowing that she did not have much time left, Radha often lamented her fate were she to die without seeing a grandchild from her dearest son. Then one day, the miracle happened. Malti became pregnant. Though it was a troublesome pregnancy, she delivered a healthy child – a girl.

Radha often spent lonely afternoons on the terrace with Malti's newborn daughter basking in the sun besides her. Downstairs in the hall, Vidyadhar's booming baritone could be heard reverberating through the large house. He was shouting profanities at the scurrying staff or family to make them follow his orders. He yelled that Radha did not bother about him anymore. On the terrace above, as she cooed lullaby to the little one,

Radha would thank the god's for sparing her from hearing the gibberish being spewed down below!

The dainty and demure Radha had always hoped that Vidyadhar would mellow down with age but volcano often bursts when its least expected and even after years of dormancy. It was probably his incessant shouting or his illogical demands over her time that led to the long hours of neglecting herself with diabetes. She slowly lost her sense of hearing. Radha often smiled and felt at peace with the thought that if she could not shut him away from her life, she could at least shut him out of her hearing.

Revolt to Break Free

The birth of Maya was not an easy one for Malti. Raised in the deeply interconnected by lanes of a bustling riverside town, Malti herself was like the free-flowing river. Fun loving and carefree, she lived each day as it came. Her father was respected far and wide for his intellectual prowess and was conferred the degree of Achaarya by the scholars. He encouraged Malti to pursue higher studies from an early age. Like a sponge soaking up knowledge, there seemed to be no shackles that could ever bind her curiously free spirit. She was truly a study in contrast.

On one hand she loved delving deep into the logic of the subject to gauge its origins, while on the other, she enjoyed being an innocent maiden ready to plunge her siblings into the cold river waters just to satisfy a whimsical bet. Neighbors' often told her family that it'll be difficult to find a groom who could satisfy her curiously fleeting mind.

Then one day Vidyadhar Chowdhary's younger son, Madan's proposal came for Malti. When some alderman had suggested to Chowdhary Sahib to look for a match between his son and Achaarya's daughter, her father's respectful social status appealed to Vidyadhar. Meanwhile Madan had seen her in another family wedding recently and not only her argumentative prowess but also her laughing, mischievous eyes had stolen his heart.

Now there were only two demands to be met. One was that the girl's father would gift a car to the boy's family in the wedding and the other was that the groom would attend the wedding sitting atop a silver carriage. Possibly years ago, Vidyadhar had felt smaller in stature seeing his beautiful young bride arrive in a silver carriage to his humble abode. This was his moment to reclaim his glory.

The year was 1967. Twenty years of Indian independence had passed. On his part, Achaarya was happy that his dearest daughter was getting married to a doctor, one of a noble profession. Malti and Madan's wedding took place in a beautiful pandaal, the wedding hall, decorated with freshly fragrant flowers brought in from the riverside markets.

The silver carriage was granted on loan by the then Maharajah of Banaras to the Achaarya for his daughter's wedding. The down payment for the car was given in cash to the groom's father to be purchased later. The bride and the groom looked radiant and completely unaware of these transactions and what the future held in store for them.

Malti came to her new home resplendent in her Banarasi saris and her zeal to impress everyone with her cooking skills, her superfast home organizational style and

above all her friendly nature to connect with her new family. Very soon she was the cheerful troubleshooter for everyone around the house.

The small temple room next to the vast kitchen turned into a friendly alcove of nonstop chatter where Radha would open her heart to Malti and both women would discuss anything under the sun, the elder one often gently guiding the younger whenever a relationship dilemma arose and the younger one often bringing a dose of laughter to the parched life of the elder woman. Radha loved Malti like her own daughter.

Vidyadhar was a different case though. The first time she tried to explain something to her aging father-in-law, Vidyadhar raised a finger at her and his booming voice bellowed out, "listen here young lady...." and Malti fainted. The time was passing quickly. Soon it was time for Madan to move out and join the hospital duties he had been trained for. Malti too was excited to start a family. Vidyadhar put his foot down. He had established a diary business for his cousins and wanted his own sons to join and carry it forward.

"A doctor can work from anywhere, even while milking a cow," he would tell Madan.

The handsome young doctor was left tongue-tied in the towering presence of his father. It looked like the young couple will continue to stay tied to the shoestrings of Vidyadhar forever at his beck and call.

The birth of their daughter, Maya, brought the much-needed joy back in their lives. Malti, while crooning to her daughter, often introspected on her fate. Despite her fiery nature, she tried hard to fit in. Her own PhD had gone to waste because she was not

allowed to work outside. Malti began searching for solutions to at least fix her husband's dilemma.

When she became pregnant with her second child, she beseeched her mother-in-law to send her to deliver at her parental house this time. Radha agreed. Knowing that her feisty daughter-in-law had something in mind, she hugged both the tiny Maya and the much pregnant Malti close to her bosom, wishing them safe times ahead and shrank back into the confines of the temple room.

The time slowly passed. Malti and Madan communicated over letters. As the month of delivery approached, Malti struggled with her conscience. She didn't want to be labelled as a home breaker but her loving heart couldn't see her husband succumbing to the tyranny of her father-in-law quietly. She knew he didn't have it in him to break free. She steeled herself. Ironically it was the auspicious day of Ganesh Visarjan, a day when lord Ganapati, after spending a glorious ten days on Earth, goes back to Mount Kailash to be with his parents. On this special day, Malti and Madan were blessed with a son.

Travelling overnight and wading through the large festive processions, Madan reached the hospital just in time to see his son take his first baby squeals. He was joyous. Their family seemed complete. When it was time to get discharged and go home, Madan asked Malti when she could travel. He wanted to take her back to his waiting family. She refused.

The long and lonely months of staying without Madan at her parental home, had hardened Malti's resolve. She implored Madan to take up the medical job offered by the state government. She would take both their children and go live with him in whatever

wilderness it was and create a home there but she would die before seeing him waste his education and his dreams like this, she informed him.

Madan had always seen his mother suffer silently. This unwaveringly strong woman standing in front of him was like an empowering vision come true from some distant dream. Even the pain of childbirth could not shake away her resolve. He chose her strength to be the guiding light in his life and accepted the job posting to a medical health clinic in the villages near his father's city, just so that he was always nearby and still independent to pursue his dreams.

The bonds were never severed with the family, just a distance was created to allow the young saplings to grow away from the all-enclosing shade of the mighty tree.

Heal

As the years passed, Madan and Malti sometimes travelled back home on short trips to stay connected with whatever remained of their parental families. Maya and Varun were growing up in the healthy pollution free air of the village. When it was time for their higher studies, Maya came back to stay with Vidyadhar in the city while Varun was sent to a boarding school so that their education did not suffer. Their smaller siblings stayed back in the village till they too grew big enough to move out to follow their dreams in life. Time flew.

Maya grew up to be a beautiful girl, a lovely mix of Radha's willingness to nurture everyone and Malti's feisty nature to rise above any injustice. Her laughing eyes often made even the crankiest of her cousins joyful. No one was left untouched by her humor. Yet when it came to keeping secrets, she was still the closest to Varun, her

younger sibling, who would visit during his school holidays. Nonstop talks and funny revenge plans were made over misdeeds done by anyone else. Mouthwatering homemade laddoos and chiwda snacks were gorged upon that Malti would bring with her whenever she visited them.

And soon it was time for Maya to marry and settle in life. A lovely proposal came of an elder son of a noble family well set in a metropolitan city. He worked in the merchant navy and would be offshore for almost six months every year but the flip side was that he would show

Maya the world. For a spunky girl like Maya, those six months were pretty daunting. Not because she missed having her husband, Rajiv, around, but because in that time she realized her mother-in-law ensured that Maya, the bahu, decked up to the neck in heavy brocade dresses and jewelry to show-off to neighbors and also cooked and ran the family house because the maids could not be trusted to do the work properly.

Their house was filled with innumerable artifacts and it was a mammoth task to keep everything neat and organized in the prevalent humid climate. And food was always homemade and freshly served. But when Maya would be thinking of retiring to her own bedroom to rest, her mother-in-law would lovingly call out to her,

“Bahu massage some warm oil on my feet,” And she complied.

When Rajiv would be home, Mummyji would concoct some way to keep Maya besides her at odd times. Even during her periods, Maya's mother-in-law would tell her to clean the temple room and cook food like every other day, not because she was a liberal minded lady, but because who else was there to do the job!

Life was tough for Maya. But in her heart, she knew what the generations before her had faced and how the silent yet emotional torture could tarnish mental peace and good health. Maya did not wish for a lonely fate like Radha or to be a rebellious outcast like Malti. Maya's strength lay in the fact that Rajiv trusted her explicitly and encouraged her to be herself. Like her, he too believed that emotional torment has existed since ages but one must learn to overcome the hardships without losing self-esteem.

She decided to lovingly nurture her new family. Preparing her father-in-law's nutritious oil free meals, ensuring his medical visits and medicines were on time, raising her own two children with all the cultural values ingrained in them since childhood, Maya did her duty well. She found ways to spend time for herself too. She learnt painting.

As for her mother-in-law, Maya chose to care for her like she would for any other living soul, with loving gratitude. They truly say that love can be won by redemption. And in doing that, Maya liberated both her tormentor and herself.



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Annapurna - Waiting...

By: Annapurna Sharma

Nurse, I am Preksha. It means to behold. Behold my King and my Prince. Hehehe! I have been nurturing them, father and son, ever since I knew them. But none of them is here today. At least Ritesh, my husband, should have been here. Huh, he was never there, not once in these 37 years of marriage. I am not surprised at his pathetic behavior. But, yes, I am a little shocked that he isn't here, even today.

I am lying on this hospital bed and can feel the sun outside. The fabric of the curtains is soft, light colored, with horizontal stripes of soft-blue and soft-pink, the stripes spaced out evenly with so much space in between that the colors will never meet, just like us. I can sense the harshness of the sun, blistering, as if I am about to die, about to extinguish like a chip of wood or an atom of carbon. Whoosh!

Nurse, will he come? Nurse, lower the AC temperature. He will feel hot and stuffy here. Will he come?

My eyes are closed yet I can feel movements around me. One of the girls is checking the vitals. Another is inspecting the tubes trespassing through my nose. Another is regulating the fluid flow through my veins, through my skin, my heart. There is yet another preparing the survival-dose to be injected. Will they be able to save me?

Nurse, do you hear me? You have to keep me alive. Do you hear me? I want to see him.

He's busy. Always is/ was/ will be. So much work. Tch, tch, tch! He loves me. Lots. That's what he intends to tell me one day.

Which day? Shall I write the day and date on the wall?

I asked him the same question when he deferred his decision to buy a computer desk. I grabbed a piece of charcoal and wrote on the wall – August 20. I looked at him for the year. He scrunched his teeth. A few days later I erased the date as best as I could. The charcoal was stubborn like him. It was from the batch of charcoal I bought to boil milk and make paramannam for Surya Bhagwan on Ratha Saptami. I know he loved the sweet dish. I waited for him to say a few words, to caress my curls, to ask if my arms and legs pained after long hours of house work.

Nurse, do you hear me? I will wait. Waiting. Waiting. For him.

I was waiting for him the first time I met him at Modern Cafe on Besant road. I gulped glasses of water one after another. The waiter asked, 'Madam, shall I get some tea/ coffee?' It was the first time I was meeting a man and I didn't want to immerse myself in slurping some shitty hot beverage and miss his entry through the glass doors.

Actually I loved drinking strong filter coffee or watery tea with ginger or Basil but I was worried I might miss him in my busyness of savoring the beverage. I said it aloud. The waiter stared at me and in that brief moment he was standing in front of me.

Nurse, the exhaustion of the one-hour wait dissipated. My fingers felt numb and I wanted to drink something hot. I was gazing unabashedly at his face, clean shaven, the skin appeared raw and fresh. I assumed he'd apologize – sorry, sorry; I am late, sorry, sorry. I lowered my eyes. But he said he will order something to eat.

Idli. Idli will be fine. (I hate idli). He ate like he was starving from several days. In between mouthfuls he asked me to eat. I shifted in my chair as though I was sitting on a clump of pins. He did not glance at me. I managed to gorge one idli. He said, let's go. We were out in fifteen minutes. He said it's sultry and we should drink Sugandhi water. Yuck! I gulped the drink in one go.

Nurse, my father chuckled when I shared my thoughts – before the roots of Sugandhi unfurled their earthiness all over me, I gulped it.

His face turned red. I knew you'd think he was flushed with emotions, but it was the sun. My eyes roved over the flesh under his jaw. I wanted to pat his cheeks and tickle his dimple. We sat near the river whose bosom was dry, filled with desiccated dog shit.

The current flowed down towards the endless Bay only in the rainy season, when the rains are surplus. The dam was where water is stored, where love is held back from flowing seamlessly like a dream. Well, I am yet to discover that my life might be like the dam water, imprisoned and craving. We sat there till sundown.

Nurse, my friend asked me, what you talked. I said nothing. She didn't believe me but you must.

We didn't really talk, God promise. I am an avid reader; my reading capacity is two Nancy Drew books per day – one borrowed on my library card and the other my friend's. I want you to know that I am well read. I am well informed. My mother asked, 'did you talk about children?' What! No! Silly!

All my life I lived in railway colonies. I am broad minded, square shouldered and even headed like the broad gauged tracks. You can dissect me, but that is what you will find. The one thing I ever desired was to go-to-work. I was teaching in a college until

Hritish was born. When I was pregnant I had severe backache. The nurse on duty retorted – didn't your back ache when you were at it. He said that the nurse was right.

It was 10 pm. I was in bed aligning my body to that of Ritesh's when baby Hritish twisted and turned in the cradle. Ritesh said it's ok and we continued our nightly love. He began to whine, those short bursts of whimper like the bleating of sheep. I reached over and patted him to sleep. Ritesh glared at me, as if it was my fault. I planted a long, wet kiss on his cheek. The baby began to howl again. I jumped out of bed and picked Hritish up. I cuddled him to my bosom, he stopped crying.

Nurse, Ritesh said, 'the little rascal is competing with his father,' and turned towards the wall. Within seconds he was snoring.

I rocked Hritish alternately in my arms and lap. This became a routine. The pediatric informed us about some babies being colic. He was so little yet his farts filled the room.

Nurse, I dreaded the nights. Snores and whines packed our bedroom. I tried sleeping in the afternoons. Ritesh usually came home for lunch. He wanted a quickie because nights were his son's; he guffawed and pulled me into his arms.

My eyes were layered with streaks of red and my body ached. I swallowed Dicoflenac. The lady doctor smiled forcefully as if she knew. Ritesh didn't like to eat outside food. So I had to cook at home. I wanted to smack Ritesh's snoring face. He's an engineer with the government department, working on sites in the harsh sun or pelting rain or unkind winter. I told myself that I can't complain.

Nurse, I was relieved when Hritish joined school.

I went back to work. The college authorities considered my talent. They said I had a natural flair for teaching.

That's when I realized how much my family (my husband and son) loved me. The only thing on my mind was to satisfy their needs.

Hritish's lunch box returned home uneaten. I assumed he was still a kid and will slowly learn to eat.

Nurse, do you know what happened to Ritesh's lunch?

It lay cold in the Milton casserole on my mahogany dining table till I returned in the evening. I obliged when my father gifted the table for my birthday. Ritesh didn't mind as long as no one thought it was dowry. It was similar to the table we had at home. My father and I pressed our paining cheeks when we laughed at my mother's antics, her arms moving vigorously in the air to describe my childhood activities. She said the only things I didn't do on the table was sleeping and bathing.

Nurse, Ritesh faked a smile. I know it's fake. Fake. Because his smile did not extend from ear to ear.

I used the table for chopping vegetables, rolling chapathis, folding clothes, packing lunch boxes etc etc. In the night I cleared the table and wiped till the wood shone. Sometimes I patted the surface and whispered, 'tomorrow is going to be a hectic day'. On most days I heard its exhausted and raspy acknowledgement.

Hritish was in fourth standard. He needed extra coaching in Maths and English.

Nurse, are you married? Are you aware of maternal guilt pangs? I quit my job.

I loved the name Ritesh. I wanted to call him by his name, but you know the conservative stuff – you must respect your husband growled my mother-in-law. As if. As

if respect was a commodity on sale. When I was pregnant I contemplated on two names – Hritish if it was a boy and Hritisha if it was a girl. Thankfully, Ritesh liked the names. He had the last say in everything.

Nurse, aren't the names similar. Ah! You got my idea.

I thought these two men in my life were mine, their likes and dislikes were mine.

Nurse, isn't it weird? Ritesh never thought so about me.

My neighboring lady balked when I told her I made paneer tikka for Hritish and paneer burji for Ritesh. She said, 'You are feeding their ego.' She cooked dal-rice for her family. When I told Ritesh about it, he said, 'we didn't ask you to make?'

Another time he added that a woman didn't need a head to prepare food.

True, a woman needed nothing to cook mouth-watering food.

Nurse, no one ever asks me my likes and dislikes.

I love majjiga pulusu, the sour buttermilk cooked with ginger, green chili, gram flour and mustard paste. My mother often smacked my head whenever I licked the plate. No one knows about my favorite – broad bean curry with sesame powder.

Ritesh eats curries with lots of onions and spice.

Hritish had this habit of wetting the bed till he was five. I said I needed a washing machine – the one I had seen in a friend's house. Ritesh couldn't afford IFB. Of course there were other problems – we had no direct water connection.

We purchased a semi-automatic Whirlpool washing machine and set it up in the kitchen. I struggled with the bundle of pipes (inlet and outlet). Six months later my neighbor made the water arrangements in his house for their newly bought IFB.

Nurse, it's not Ritesh's fault. He was busy.

I know I am mature, the real mature types.

Nurse, he will be here any moment. Lower the AC temperature. He will feel hot and stuffy here.

‘Gawd! She is as good as dead. Have they sent word to the old man?’

‘He’s stuck up in some meeting.’

Nurse, do you hear me? You have to keep me alive till he comes.

‘Send the body to the mortuary.’



Annapurna Sharma is the Deputy Chief Editor of Muse India literary e-journal (www.museindia.com) and writes the column Life & Literature for the Muse India journal. Her works are forthcoming, or have appeared, in Westward Quarterly, Mad Swirl, Spark, The Bomabay Review, Destine Literare, Reader's Digest, Women's Era, Assam Tribune, ActiveMuse, International Writers Journal amongst others. She also contributes book reviews to Muse India and Triveni Journal. A nutritionist by profession, but a writer at heart, her maiden book of poems, Melodic Melange was awarded for excellence, 2019 (Pulitzer Books). Her poem was shortlisted for All India Poetry Competition, 2017 conducted by The Poetry Society of India. She is one of the Advisory Board members of the quarterly magazine Science Shore and initiated a series of video presentations titled Nutrition Talks – Heart to Heart.

Adrija - Wave Catchers: Introspecting the Domestification of Violence

By: Adrija Chatterjee

It was rather difficult to believe, there could be men who never stared at their wife in cold, calculated anger for the wife's mockery of the husband's habits. That too amidst a whole group of people who were invited for a house warming party.

Her neck craned, once towards Ashoka aunty and once towards her husband, the Chief Managing Director of her father's company. The vibe was perfectly normal between them, Uncle V. was in absolute acceptance of his misdemeanor that followed his habitual inebriated state.

Her gaze looked around, for her father, she did not want to miss his expression at that situation. She found him, with several other men, who discussed how coward their MD was to not have enough control over the wife's tongue. She felt scared, for the next few evenings and nights because mom had overheard both of these situations.

"Mom, please don't raise this issue once we are back home. I have mid-semester tests the next week."

Mom's eyes looked faint with disappointment, probably she remembered how father had slapped and slammed her on the door that night almost twelve years back. All because mom had said, during a family function that father never handed even a hundred rupee note for her expense. Mom had miscalculated, the rest of the family members only supported her husband's stance.

"Aww, we all go through this!"

"You aren't the only one."

"You know my husband does not even want to gift a single dress to his in-laws! Imagine."

She was just nine at that time and today she was to be twenty-one in less than two months. It wasn't the first time she felt scared, in fact, it was the most normal thing for her. That dryness inside the mouth, a sense of fatigue in the head with a fast yet strenuous pulse rate. It had been with her, ever since the evening she tried to feel Alice's thrill, as a five-year-old. She was determined, ready to leap inside the rabbit's keyhole of the closed door of her parent's bedroom.

Once her eyes adjusted themselves to watch the scene that went inside, she saw her mother being pulled by her head, lumps of hair tightened within the grip of her father. He dragged mother from one corner of the room to the other, despite all the punches and beatings she handed out in defense.

She never understood a thing of that, a part inside her scared to death having watched something that shook all the love she had for her father. Another part wanted to believe something was ought to be wrong with both or perhaps it was their idea of playing some game.

As they drove back home, she counted her moments of peace and peeped towards her mother, whose eyes gave away no expression. A strong smell of whisky surrounded her father in the front seat, a smell her heart always leaped with violent jitters.

She wanted to leap out of that car and head straight to her grandparent's home, almost forty miles away. It was too late for that and such drama was certain to ignite a small-scale bloodshed later on.

She tapped her mother's shoulders right before they entered inside their home, a place she detested from the core. It was a home, right amidst chemical, tannery factories and the thermal plant her father worked in.

The principal chimney situated exactly diagonal to their bedroom emitted sulfur and nitrogen oxide fumes in periodic intervals. She signaled her mother, to head straight inside the bedroom, the last one, right above the road that was pounded by incessant ferry of container trucks.

"Hah! My parents should have heard that! Criticizing a husband before people!"

She didn't have much to change, just some lip color and kohl to remove, while her mother unwrapped pieces of costume jewelry.

"Why fret mom? Is there anything concrete you may do?"

"Never trust a man, they aren't going to do anything!"

"You can't say that way, Mom! I know of my friends, people my girlfriend's date, which never saw a bad father or a man in life! There are exceptions!"

She could never support that all men are bad rhetoric, no matter how hard it was for her to believe. For her, deep down, her father was probably not the only man, her mother had the obligation to choose. She knew how her mother wished to remain zeroed within the concept of her comfort zone, domesticity, and shied away from building a life from scratch.

The next morning, she found her father getting ready for office, she approached him, and her heart throbbed along with a massive churn inside her stomach.

"My semester fees are due next week. Will you pay?"

"How much is that?"

His father applied cologne on his chin; a fresh mint odor wrapped him every time he shaved his beard.

"Five hundred and sixty for six months."

"Okay."

It wasn't a clear scenario, whether he agreed to hand it over or shelved it in mind. She wasn't sure if it was a great idea to clarify her doubts. He hated being crossed during the early hours of the day as much as he did in the latter half of the day. He never glanced back at her, not something she expected from her father, the one she mentally fought with every moment of her existence.

"I have kept the money on the dining table."

"What money?"

Her mother came out of the kitchen, she felt alarmed, involving her mother was the last thing she had on her mind. A glimpse towards the table and she knew that father had not even kept half the money. It had been spiraled in any case, mom did sense how father kept the small amount and did not care for the rest.

"So who is going to give the rest of the tuition fees? You even said you wouldn't pay for the nutrition drink she takes!"

"Why! Go and ask your parents to give you that! They will, am sure! They love their granddaughter!"

"Why! Yes of course, everybody loves their children or child-like younger ones! There aren't many like you!"

Her father did not even look towards her, at that, something she feared most. She knew like every other year, mom had to ask grandpa to provide for the rest. She wasn't

aware of that health drink issue, she felt guilty for that, for her drink that was the new bone of contention.

"Why should I ask my parents every time! Can't you feel ashamed for exploiting two middle-class retired people?"

"Listen, you better stop your rant, else it will be bad!"

"What bad Mr. B? What is the best you will do? Probably slap and make me land on the bed? Or better, slam my head on the wall?"

She felt the fever coming back on the joints of her limbs that sense of her insides set on fire and her eyes felt flushed with a heat she could hardly bear with. It was the new usual for her, to feel that unwell, nauseated, and dizzy. She knew a thermometer would certainly read two degrees higher temperature for her body.

"YOU BITCH! HOW DARE YOU!"

The window glass panes rattled the same way they did when the mile-long container truck trailed along the road beside the bedroom. The first day she'd heard that shaking growl from her father, as a six-year-old, she thought he could be capable of anything he wanted. Till today she almost confused it for the growl of some mythical animal set on fire and unleashed.

Her father pulled aside the window curtain before he pushed mom aside from the window. How clever, she thought; this self of his was to be carefully hidden, well protected from the world. All his physical violence and temper were to be minutely executed and the other residents of this apartment were supposed to filter just her mother's sharp pitched feminine shrieks.

Trouble-making woman doesn't she know men never fared well with constant nudges and nagging! Six minutes, the precise duration of the entire session of her mom being slapped, pulled by her hair lasted for the morning. Her mother got up; she did not cry anymore, probably she knew how pointless it was.

"Why don't you get some part-time job!"

It was the first time, someone had suggested something constructive to her, it was P, a friend at her University, and the one she talked to less frequently.

"Arre! What job she's going to do! She is always feeling sick and all."

It was her best friend R, but she was still unaware of what exactly made her bestie, given all that mockery and jeers that were handed out to her.

"You know I don't feign that! Nobody likes being and tagged as the sick!"

"Ohh! Wow! You take offense so soon!"

She did not know if that was manipulation, all she knew was a part-time job could be a partial solution to her troubles. Her best friend walked off, there was a scoop to share with her other friends. She stared at R, amazed to see her nonchalant demeanor. R was someone who knew every trouble she had to go through, the sum total of her existence.

"Thank you, P that helps."

She wanted to end that awkward situation, abruptly without questions asked. It was the reason she never discussed her domestic problems. Yes, she had not been keeping well for over a year now, merely twenty-two years old and burdened with stress most could not even identify with, let alone understand.

P left the chair beside her, she sat there alone, in that dark corridor, where people who moved around had faces. Yet not a single face she could ask to discuss her life with.

There was a doctor's appointment scheduled that evening, for the nagging pain she had in her joints and also for the immense tightness around her chest.

"Your test reports show advanced Compulsive Obstructive Pulmonary Disorder or general asthma. The x-ray reports too aren't fine, a degenerative gap in C4, C5 disc of the cervical spine area and even an L5 S1 spondylolysis."

It wasn't the kind of diagnosis a common twenty-two-year-old usually faces in life, the doctor's words felt alien to her. She knew her father would not fund her higher studies but it was remotely against her hope that her ambitions were to die out in the labyrinth of medical treatment. Mom's eyes had no expression left, she could only ask,

"Doctor, is there any way to cure this?"

"Sorry, these are not curable. Controllable, yes, but extremely orthodox approach of treatment and of course immense lifestyle modifications to prevent further worsening!"

She couldn't fathom the aggregate consequence of all that, apart from the immediate ones- that her father was to be again confronted. This time, it would be for her medicines, her treatment. The thought of funds she needed to enroll herself in a management education program took an immediate backseat for her, right there in that doctor's chamber.

"Can stress be a reason for this doctor?"

Her mother looked at her, surprised at that unexpected angle.

"Yes, can be, but you are so young, what stress can you have?"

"My father doctor, he abuses us, both me and my mother."

"Ohh! That's unfortunate but you cannot exactly do anything!"

She knew he was correct, like most of the others, who chuckled at her helplessness, and some like her bestie, walked all over her with their insensitive jeers.

"Doctor, can't you help? Your written note, where you certify how stress-triggered chronic conditions in this person."

"And how exactly is it going to be of any help to you?"

The doctor folded his hands to his chest, a line of sarcasm made a smiley curve upon his lips. She found the amusement in that doctor's eyes too repugnant to continue her little way out. Structural problem my dear, your battle is in layers, she told herself.

"Well doctor, I have noted few numbers of NGOs and Women's cell, I can lodge a complaint there."

She looked at her mother who sat there, with vacuous eyes that felt half surprised at the daughter's courage and half distraught at the helplessness of the entire situation. The doctor nodded with a look of awe at her mother; did he try to find approval there?

"Sorry, but these are procedural matters, unless you have enough legal authority to back your case up, I cannot issue such a certificate. You see, these are legal matters and who did you say your father was?"

"He works in an administrative post, some managerial level of the Region"

She wanted to collect her papers, grab her mother and herself out of that asphyxiating room. Instead, she sat there, like some programmed puppet, silent and motionless.

"Then there's little you can do unless your mother really wants to do something."

Her mother alternated her gaze between her and the doctor, the look of uncertainty loomed on her face.

"Doctor, I didn't know that my domestic tiffs could break my daughter's health down."

She felt betrayed, all she wanted to scream out was inform them of the IPC ACT Section 498(A) which required little documentation except minor ones, for the complainant to register their First Investigation Reports. It was amended recently in 2005 and in three years had brought a revolution in the problems that related to the under-reporting of Domestic Violence Cases. And her mother's was almost an Open and Shut case, twenty years of abuse and deprivation! Everybody knew justice was bound to be on their side!

"See Madam, I have other patients waiting. If you don't mind... you take these medicines and don't worry!"

That same old vague don't worry scheme, she had grown tired of it. From her family members, her mother's relatives, paternal aunts and uncles, office colleagues, and now even the doctor!

"Don't you get tired mom feeling this same sense of confusion for the past twenty-two years?"

She walked with her mother beside her on a pedestrian lane along Allen Park, Kolkata. They were both probably tired of that continuous battle, one at home, the other of finding a solution to that. The solution partly lay in coming out of that home, but then what?

"You know well, your grandparents aren't in a state to bear your expenses fully!"

She failed to understand what exactly did her father provide for in full... education expense full? No, food expenses full? No! Clothes expenses full? Hell No! Would he fund her further studies? No way!

"But I guess they bear a large part already!"

"That's the most they can bear...and in any case who is going to give a job to some close to a fifty-year-old woman and what good would it do to you or me?"

They had arrived at the crossroad when it was almost evening, the soft twilight flooded the cross of the St. Thomas Church. The world around looked magnificent, mellowed in some gentle caress of nature. It was so difficult to fathom that chaos settled deep within the structure of the world around. The chaos of choice, of consequence, and most essentially of opportunities.

"What if we go to the police and register a case? I will be your witness! Won't you do it for me, Mumma?"

She knew the answer almost intuitively, her father most probably would hire the best lawyer and eventually get himself cleared of all charges. He knew the best ones in town, the ones who could delve deep into the pitfalls of any law, any redressal mechanism. Her mother probably thought the same way.

"You remember what happened when you went to his office to complain about him?"

She remembered that day vividly, her father had not paid the phone bills and all her requests nullified by the slew of the curse he used over the telephonic conversation. She had not waited for anything and straight away visited him at his office. He had been dumbstruck at first but that never lasted long. Once she started going about in cabins and

informed his seniors about how her father deprived them of economic rights, abused them, she watched the veil of decency drop nowhere. The harshest critique his father received was from one of his super seniors,

"Hey, don't do this man, don't you care of your repute."

The rest simply tried to appease her with some free drink, a lure of upcoming examinations, and some even with a good dinner invitation! She knew as she watched her mother then, on that road, that there was little option. Her mother, not greatly educated, having failed to have been decisive at an age where it was required, had practically little chance left.

Their way out from the father was meant to have little opportunity for them, thanks to the rank her father held in society. While they, armed with nothing but two old people, stood little ground. It was less about redressal and more about the consequence of it.

"Mom, can we go to grandparents' today?"

They walked back, towards the road that led to the nearest metro station, her bag weighed a lot more than her disc gap permitted her to. Once inside the metro capsule, she did not find a seat, she knew most never suspected her to have severe pain, inflammation, or other issues.

The same way they never did about her home, the domestic whose violence was a shunned subject around, it's consequence on her, and even more tabooed a subject. She had little choice, but to wait till she had enough education to be able to land up a job. She looked at her mother, who stood, with a host of other weight. Education too needed funds, something that forever evaded her mother.



Adrija Chatterjee has completed her Master of Philosophy in Foreign Policy Studies with special reference to Peace Theory. She later took up creative and freelance writing to focus upon the marginalized section of the social hierarchy. In this course her work of fiction and poetry has been published in ActiveMuse, Café Dissensus, Alipore Post and The Chakkar. Recently her poetry has been selected in an upcoming International Anthology focusing on feminism, Looking Glass Anthology Vol. 2: Letters to Our Son. Besides, her academic papers have been published in Sage Journals and a special volume of United Nations Academic Impact.

Akanksha - Makeup Box

By: Akanksha Singh

Richa sat in front of the mirror desperately dabbing the ice pack on her cheekbones, praying for the YouTube hack to work as miraculously as it had for @BeautyQueen21. She peeked a little in hope of seeing clear skin but just as a tinge of blue greeted her, she instantly put the ice pack back on her face.

She was thankful that it was early December and not the middle of summer, winter clothing provided better coverage than any makeup. She couldn't believe that she was more worried about the marks visible on her skin than the food she was going to serve to her parents who were visiting her for the first time after she got married. She should be happy, even excited to see her parents after six months, but all she felt was a sense of relief.

She was relieved about her parents' visit only for the reason that maybe with them in the house he wouldn't attempt a second time and that would at least give her two days to make sense of everything.

She wasn't shocked, as some of the women in this situation might be; she had grown up with this even though her mother had tried her best to keep it all hidden from her by her thick flawless make-up.

She believed that it had kept her little girl from seeing the harsh glaring truth, and it would have worked if she could have also somehow hidden her blazing pain so blatant in her eyes. Therefore, Richa knew right from her childhood and believed that a happy marriage was probably a thing that existed only in fairy tales.

Until today, she had always believed that her mother covered up the truth for her so that her daughter did not have to face that her dear father wasn't who she believed him to be. But now, she knew it wasn't all for her.

Her mother also needed the perfect painting, maybe sometimes more than she did, maybe she just needed an escape from reality, and maybe living in denial wasn't so bad because she would have loved to believe that last night didn't happen. She would have given everything she holds dear to be able to say that her husband didn't force himself on her, that she didn't get raped.

She couldn't even say the word out loud, she tried, but couldn't.

Maybe saying it would make it real and not saying it would somehow take it all away. She tried pushing the thought aside, tried to let it go, she even considered the possibility that maybe she was mistaken about the whole thing and it didn't happen the way she remembered it.

Maybe it was all in her head. Her lips trembled at the thought and she bit down on them, hard, regretting instantly as pain coursed through the cuts making her lower jaw almost immobile for a second reminding her again that it did happen and now, nothing can change that.

Her heart broke at that and her insides hurt more than her outer flesh. All she wanted right now was to crawl somewhere and never come out.

She had always believed that her experiences had made her stronger, that she was somehow stronger than all the women who had lived through it all without saying anything, covering it all up, burying the red, black and blue with layers and coats of white

and pale, like her mother, but she was disgusted to find out that she was wrong, she wasn't strong enough.

She was the same, like her mother.

She didn't have the strength or the courage to stand up for herself against everyone else, against her husband, and more than anything she didn't have the courage to stand against her father.

Mr. Rajesh, her father – he was a strict man, a man of integrity and principles. People who knew him closely knew him as a reasonable, rational, and honest man which was saying a lot in today's world. Richa had always looked up to him all her life and even though he was more strict than was necessary, he had been a good father to her which was probably why she could never hate him as strongly as she should have for abusing her mother.

If she hadn't been privy to all their fights and her father's temper she would have never believed that a man like her father could be an awful husband.

Her father...who was coming today!

She broke away from her muddled chain of thoughts and looked at the time; it was a little over half-past six in the morning. She cannot believe that it had been only fifteen minutes since she started with the ice pack; time was moving very slowly today and at this rate, it was surely going to be the longest day of her life.

Without wasting any more minutes she removed the ice pack from her face and winced from the stiffness in her arms, she had been holding the icepack for too long. As the blood rushed in her bicep, she looked carefully at her face holding the mobile torch

with the other hand for better lighting. She didn't want to switch on the room's tube-light as that would wake him up, she was grateful for these alone moments.

Mr. Rajesh was pacing in the hall and his temper was rising with every step that he was taking. They were supposed to be leaving for the railway station half an hour back, but here he was marching right and left, getting angrier by the minute and his wife was busy doing only God knows what.

She always does that, finding ways to make him lose his temper is her favorite pastime. He cursed her under his breath and decided to give her the last few minutes more before taking the matters into his own hands, like always.

He had told her multiple times over the past week that he wanted to be at the train station an hour early before the train's arrival time, but clearly, his wife didn't hear him properly. She never does, she goes about with her perfect face, doing whatever she likes, without giving a thought about him.

He completed another round of the hall with his hands fisted in his coat's pockets and went straight for the bedroom. He looked around the room towards the dresser, expecting her to be seated there. Where is she? She wasn't there, his eyes darted straight to the bathroom door which was closed meaning she was inside. He furiously moved towards the direction of the bathroom and without waiting for anything banged his fist right at it.

The old wood didn't give in completely; it splintered a little and gave way to the hard rusty nail behind it which tore through his knuckles wounding him more than he was ready for. A sharp cry escaped through his lips and his whole body hunched forward in

pain. He tried to find support with his other hand and slowly maneuvered towards the bed, cradling his wounded hand near his chest.

The ice magic didn't work and she had known that it wouldn't work this fast, but it did look better than before. Maybe if I left it open for some time, it will get better, she thought and took a good look at her reflection in the mirror and instantly recoiled from the idea. She couldn't stand the sight of her face; she was shocked to see just how broken she looked.

The reflection staring back wasn't her.

Panicked, she searched through the shelves and brought out her makeup box.

Richa couldn't believe that there was a time in her life when she would have killed for her personal extensive makeup kit like this. She still remembered those lazy summer break afternoons when she tip-toed around the house looking for her mother's makeup and used to apply it with all the care and artistic grace that an eight-year-old could possibly acquire.

It had taken her another couple of years and a school camp trip before she had realized that the first-aid box and makeup box were supposed to be two separate things and were meant for different purposes.

But just like her mother's makeup box, hers looked the same; with small cotton rolls, bandages, disinfectants, ointments rolling around with concealer, foundation, and makeup sponges. It looked like a first aid kit married a makeup box and decided to have a baby.

She tried to laugh at the irony of the situation, but all that came out was an awkward cough with a few discarded tears.

Her phone started vibrating in on the dresser top and she dismissed the alarm before it could ring through loudly. It was seven in the morning which meant she had twenty minutes to fix her face. She started with the task at hand, gently moving her fingers over the sensitive skin.

She repeatedly told herself that she was covering up the whole thing so that she could go through her day without giving him the satisfaction of seeing her like this, broken and vulnerable. She didn't want him to think like he had won and could do it again. But deep down she knew that she was doing it for the same reasons for which her mother and all the other women in this situation do – what will the people say?

For the first time, she was realizing the kind of pressure that does exist. All through her life before her marriage, Richa had always blamed her mother for not saying anything; she had even hated her for it, for not showing the courage and now, when she was standing on the same road her feet felt heavy like they have been paralyzed to take that step which had seemed obvious and easy before.

She added the last bit of expert touches and was relieved to see a fake pale white coat which almost looked like her natural skin, but didn't. At least the colors are not peeping through. On cue, the alarm rang through the room, alerting her instantly. She dabbed her eyes one last time to catch the remaining of those stray tears, picked up the ice pack, and left the room, quietly.

Neelam was hunched over the toilet expecting to puke when she heard his footsteps coming through the door and she could tell by the heaviness in his gait that he was furious. She wasn't surprised, he was always angry with her. She looked at the time

on her phone; she still had time to get ready, if only she could feel a little better. She didn't want to miss this chance of seeing her only daughter after her marriage; she had to fight and argue for weeks with Rajesh – her husband, before he had finally agreed to a two-day trip.

After years of living with him, going through everything he put her through, a little door banging was the least of her worries, and right now she was more worried about reaching the station on time.

Moments later, as expected the bathroom door frame shook with the force inflicted upon it. She didn't flinch. Nothing shocked her now. She was waiting for him to storm out of the room before stepping out, but what alerted her was the cry that followed.

She had never heard that sound in the entire twenty-six years of living with him. There had been days and countless nights when she had wished nothing else from him yet, she never believed that she would get a chance. But now, it didn't give her the satisfaction that she had thought it would.

She rushed out of the bathroom and found him sitting on the bed, hunched over slightly. He had his handkerchief wrapped around his hand and his eyes were closed.

She knew that he had heard her come in, so she waited for him to say something. She didn't want to look eager to tend to him and to be honest, she didn't know how he would react if she did anything on her own.

Moments passed and she heard him muttering slowly under his breath, "Where is cotton?"

She heard him and moved towards her dresser without any urgency in her gait; she took out her makeup box and scrabbled through it. She could feel that his earlier

dissipated anger was returning quickly, with each passing second. But, she didn't panic; she knew what was going to happen and as expected, without wasting any time he got up and moved towards the dresser, as fast as his present state allowed.

With his other undamaged hand, he grabbed Neelam's arm tightly and turned her towards him. Before he could lash out at her again, she took his bleeding hand in hers and started wiping the blood with the cotton in her hand. She knew that he didn't deserve her sympathy and she was pathetic for taking care of him. But, she didn't stop.

Rajesh was standing outside her daughter's apartment, double-checking the address, making sure that he hadn't mixed up the floor number. After satisfying himself with the information, he rang the doorbell. It was afternoon, so he knew that his son-in-law must be at the office which was good as it will give him some alone time with Richa to explain why he was alone, not that she would ask many questions.

Before he could think of a proper excuse, Richa opened the door and smiled a little. He could see that her eyes were searching for her mother, but he didn't say anything and smiled in response. She greeted him and invited him inside.

"Maa didn't come?" She asked him with a pointed look and he knew that she didn't approve.

"She was not feeling well, so she couldn't come." He told her the half-truth and omitted the rest about him leaving her there. He saw no need to tell her and going by the look she was giving him right now, she already suspected his answer. But he knew that she wouldn't call him out on it.

He sat down on the sofa and looked around the living room, taking everything in. She gave him a glass of water and went on to make tea. He was satisfied to see that the room was decently equipped with all the modern amenities and felt proud of his decision to marry Richa.

He gave his hand a look, his bandage was dirty with hours of traveling and needed a change. He was about to call Richa for the same, but she appeared with a tray in her hand before he could have said anything and that's when he took a good proper look at her.

She looked different now, somehow older; as if he was seeing her after years and not just after six months. He blamed it all on her changed traditional clothing style and new marriage responsibilities. It will take her some time to get used to everything, he thought.

She presented him the tea with some eatables and sat down near him on a plastic chair. He wasn't one of those modern fathers, who are more of a friend to their daughters than a father, but that didn't mean that he was completely oblivious to his daughter's emotions. He believed that he observed more than he let on which was why he was a little worried about Richa. She was quiet, more than usual.

“Richa, are you okay here? Is everything alright?” he tried to ask it out of her.

“Yes, Papa, why? I am just sad because Maa didn't come. Are you alright? Is she going to be okay alone?” She replied with a small smile but it didn't touch her eyes. He believed her excuse. She must be missing her mother, it is normal for a daughter to want to see her Maa, he thought and felt a little bad for not bringing her along.

Before he could answer her questions, she noticed his bandaged hand, “What happened, Papa? How did you hurt your hand?”

He heard her question along with a dozen others which she didn't ask out loud but were apparent in her panicked voice and instead of answering her spoken ones he replied to the unsaid questions, “Yes, don't worry Richa, it happened by accident this morning. Your mother is fine, she ONLY has nausea... I need some help with the bandage change.”

He noticed her as relief washed over her face, with his answer, relaxing her features slightly. He was glad that he was speaking the truth this time.

She nodded her head and escorted him to her bedroom. After motioning him to sit down on the bed, she went over to the dresser and started rummaging through her makeup box and for a second he felt as if somebody has shot him. The déjà vu that he was witnessing seemed no less than a nightmare; he could feel his heart picking up the pace, speeding his breath and mind reeling with all the possibilities of his daughter being harmed.

He got up on his shaking legs and moved towards the dresser dreading all the way. He gently caught her by her arm, moving her slightly so that she was facing him, and all his fears came true when he saw her flinch at his touch. His eyes darted towards her makeup box which looked awfully similar to the one at home and his entire world came crumbling down at the mere thought of her daughter going through anything similar in her marriage.

He gathered all his courage, and when he could finally look at her face he found her staring at him with nothing but pain in her eyes which looked ghastly similar to ones that he had left at home, and for once in his life, he didn't know what to do.



Akanksha Singh from India is an avid reader and wants to contribute to the world of literature with something meaningful. While growing up, she has witnessed many unfortunate incidents of domestic violence in her vicinity; what disturbed her was the injustice, cruelty and the twisted mind-set of our deeply patriarchal society. Her experiences drive her to tell the stories of those who have been unprivileged and unfortunate due to the regrettable circumstances. Some of her work has been published in magazines like ActiveMuse, The Creative Post, Spillwords etc. She has also successfully contributed to a few upcoming anthologies. In her free time, she hosts a Book-Club and also volunteers as the Fiction Editor of the magazine 'The Finest Example'. When not writing, you'll find her cooking. She blogs at <https://bbubble.in/>

Monisha - Surviving Abuse in a Conservative Society

By: Monisha Raman

In conventional societies around the world that are deep-rooted in tradition, abiding by culture is the hallmark of existence. The lives of the people in such a community are dictated by the adherence to the cultural norms, though some are not pragmatic in today's time and not feasible in the current social setup. Marrying within the caste and community is one such narrative.

In such an authoritarian society, a woman's dignity and self—respect is something that is not acknowledged. Irrespective of the economic and social strata or the status of employment, there is immense pressure on women to adhere to these cultural norms. This pressure is common to urban and rural families, however in rural societies, the compulsion is more.

In such enforcing circumstances, many women are silenced every time they try to speak for themselves and dignity is still a farfetched dream for most of them. Hence, abuse becomes a way of life. While some are aware of its implications, some ignore, and the uninformed lot assumes that putting up with abuse is the prime expectation of marriage.

Discussions on domestic abuse primarily center on the physical and sexual aspects of it. There is limited acknowledgement of verbal and emotional abuse, which is also tormenting. Most women I spoke to for this piece have been victims of emotional or verbal abuse at some point in their lives. However, some were not aware they had the right to stand up to their abusers, as there is a question of respect. In some cases, the

abusers were other members of the family and not the partner, making the situation burdensome.

In a demanding culture with little regard for women's respect, leaving an abusive relationship is the last option for the victims. There is always the financial burden and also the social taboo attached to divorcees. Surviving alone is equally traumatic. The victims I spoke to found their own means to stay afloat. These are testimonies of survival, stories of resilience from women across the social class in a conservative city and small towns in South India.

Saroja

Saroja was married at the age of sixteen to a 21-year-old daily wage laborer. 'I was too young to know what was going on with my body,' she says. She recollects crying herself to sleep every single night in the early days. 'It was his mother; she was kind during our interactions before the wedding.'

She recollects how her mother-in-law became stern with her when Saroja did not match her expectations with the domestic chores. She recalls being called names even when there was not enough salt in the food. In a few years, she got used to the name-calling and slut-shaming (for Saroja was often called 'whore').

'It just became a routine,' she laughs, 'You wake up, brush, eat, go to work etc. I had an added routine.' She recalls that her emotions were numbed after a few years and she did not react or respond to her mother-in-law's name-calling.

It was during the later years that reality set in for Saroja. After three children, when life became difficult, she had to support her family financially. She went to work as domestic help for a professor's family.

'I don't know if it was his guilt or he felt inadequate, or he was just helpless, my husband began his drunken adventures. On some days, he came home and took his frustration on me. On most days, he wouldn't come back home,' she recollects. 'He didn't hit me always. He got violent only on rare days.'

She confesses that his violent blows were not as tormenting as his absence. 'You see, when he is back home, it is just a hit and few slurs, and he drops exhausted. But every moment of his absence was agonizing. I would often assume that he was with another woman. I was still ok with him visiting a brothel. But, what if he found love elsewhere?'

In the first few days of his absence, she cried herself to sleep, like the initial days of her marriage when she wept over her mother-in-law's difficult words. But as the nights of his absence became more frequent, her agitation numbed her emotions so much that she was unable to cry or scream and shout or even seek help. That is when the darkness began to consume her.

Soon stories floated about his relationship with a woman a few streets away. 'That witch entertained many men, but your husband is kind of constant there. Many men have stopped frequenting there because of your husband,' one neighbor had mentioned. It was then that she decided to confront him.

'He denied off course. Like every other man in guilt,' Saroja said. 'I did not leave it at that. I confronted him every morning he walked home.' She says that in a matter of few months, their interactions were only confrontations.

'That is when he took his mother's route and started his gaslighting. He called me names every day. He made me believe that I was the reason for his downfall. He made me believe that I was inadequate in my love- both sexually and emotionally.'

Initially, Saroja had the strength to ignore his accusations. As the criticism grew every day, she began to believe in what he said. She could not face what he said about her feminine power. After all, she carried all of the social hardships just to nurture and love her family and for her, the intimate moments with her husband were her solace. She hated her body for failing to fulfill something as basic as pleasing her man. She began to inflict minor wounds- a cut with a knife, a hit with a stone.

One morning while she went to get milk before the dawn light spread, she saw her husband walking home from a distance with another woman. From where she stood, she saw him with a clandestine smile, lost in thoughts. His face was aglow with what she presumed contentment.

She had never seen him like that, consumed in elation. That moment was a humiliating one, where she lost her feminine powers to another woman. She rushed back home and locked the doors. She heard a slight knock as she rushed to the backyard. Without a second thought, she doused herself in kerosene and struck the match.

A few decades after the incident, she still works as domestic help. For her, the extensive burn marks on her body is a reminder of her cowardice. Her days are now colorful, thanks to her grandchildren.

I took Saroja's an attempt at ending her life to deal with emotional abuse. She says her family members feared to insult or be cross with her after the incident.

Charvi

Married at 19, a year before she could finish her graduation, Charvi's first year of marriage was a dream. Having fallen in love with the man who asked her out, she had a good two years before her wedding to know and love him more. When she left for her husband's home on the day of the wedding, this is what her father said to her. 'Remember you belong to an honourable family. To safeguard our honour must be your biggest responsibility.'

Employed in the corporate sector, her husband was a loving man. They lived by themselves in a city and visited her in-laws every weekend. Her life was a breeze until the ugly face of the family she was married to slowly revealed itself. Charvi's biggest burden to carry through those humiliating days of abuse was her family's reputation.

To safeguard the honor, she kept mum even when she was chided, 'You stone! You can't bear a child even after a year.' Those abuses comparing her to inanimate objects lasted for four long years. What bothered her the most is that these offensive words hurled at her were from another woman, her mother-in-law, who was supposed to understand her helplessness.

In the four years before she was conceived with a child, Charvi was the punching bag in the family, and every misfortune in the family was blamed on her ill-luck. 'The mother of bad luck,' 'Impotent donkey,' were some of the phrases that were casually thrown at her. She was too young to know that she had the right to talk back or defend herself, and so in silence her days passed with only her tears for consolation.

What wounded her more than the abuses was her husband's silence. He always insisted on her discipline with his parents and reminded her often that she would come across as crude, haughty and disrespectful if she were to talk back. However, his most skilful blackmail was when he forced her to stay calm for the sake of their love. Stripped of her right and blackmailed emotionally almost every day, Charvi contemplated jumping from a building many times or overdosing on sedatives.

'My biggest disadvantage was my lack of education,' she remarks. 'If I were a graduate, I could have taken up some respectful job, or I would have been treated with some regard. They treated me worse than a domestic help, confined me to do all the cleaning for their family and constantly criticised my parenting style, the way I dressed, the way I spoke and behaved.'

It was only after the birth of her second son, nine years after her marriage did she find the necessity to stand up to the humility she endured. Even when she retorted to the snide remarks, she was silenced with something she was vulnerable to. 'There were many instances when I spoke back to have that woman slut-shame my sister,' she cringes.

Charvi's abuser knew how to silence her by prodding the mistakes of her close family members. Unable to bear distasteful comments being passed at her family, she became a recluse, confined to the walls of her room. She was also tempted to register in an online dating site or look for casual relationships outside of marriage until she found solace in an art form dear to her- classical dance.

Gradually, with the strength acquired by the respect and love her fellow dancers showered on her, she began to confront her mother-in-law. Destiny was cruel enough to

force her to live with her in-laws. On one such instance when her family was berated for her mistake, Charvi retorted.

She said, 'I know my sister made a mistake. She did not offend my parents and humiliate them that way your daughter did to you when she eloped with another man.'

'She went red,' Charvi smiles. 'In a few seconds, she began to weep. It was then that I realized that in all these years, it was my vulnerability that silenced me.'

Charvi never allowed herself to be a victim post that incident. 'My family's reputation did not matter beyond a point. It was a matter of my well being and I believed I had to make a sincere effort rather than blame destiny. My marriage was never the same again; there is a rift between us, which gets wider every time I stand up for myself. However, dance and children give me all the love and comfort I need. I hope that someday my husband would understand.'

Smisha

As the only daughter of highly successful professionals, Smisha* had an obsessive need to draw and doodle as a child. When she did not make a cut to enter a professional college, her parents decided that she would soon be married. In the final year of her graduation, her parents found a suitable match- an entrepreneur twelve years older.

His family had amassed immense wealth. When she refused, her parents convinced her that she would have all the comforts that they could not give her and she would never be able to get such a match. Smisha had no choice but to agree with reluctance.

Her parents were right about the wealth and comfort of her marital home, but nothing had prepared the then 20-year old Smisha for the reality of being wedded to a

large family. Her husband's sisters almost always lived in their home along with a few of his cousins. Her in-laws expected every meal at the stroke of the clock. There were people visiting them through the day as they were an industrial family and the onus was on young Smisha to attend to everyone's needs. She functioned like the needles of a clock, without the luxury of rest.

In the beginning, it was just an unpleasant word or two from the members of her family every time she failed to meet the time. Gradually, these words grew offensive. Perfection was expected out of her- she had to run the kitchen with the many helpers who took her for granted, serve food on time, attend to several guests who visited them always and serve them refreshments or meals, maintain a clean house and look presentable and neat through all these chores.

Delaying food by even a minute was met with awful comments. Every day she had to hear words like 'tramp,' 'pauper,' 'poor boot lickers.' The last two were in reference to her middle-class family and her parent's profession.

Soon, her family members invaded her personal space, berating her for every wrong action from her husband or the helpers at home. For Smisha, it was not one difficult person but many family members. At times even the helpers shot back at her when she expected more work. They called her expectations unreasonable.

Despite the exhaustion of the day, Smisha was not able to sleep well at nights. She says that she buried her exasperation within herself. She did not want to carry her worry to her parents and she did not have a social life or friends.

'I had lost touch with all my friends, and I did not step out of the house unless necessary. I did not have a social life at all,' she grimaces.

In a few years after the birth of her son, meal times began to haunt her. She shivered at the thought of getting a meal ready, even though she had several helpers around. Many times during the week, she would have panic attacks. She would shut herself in a room and wail.

Her cry, even though audible outside, did not bother her family members, and the workers were instructed not to approach her. Her husband was convinced that he married a depressed woman. After one such instance, when she locked herself for 48 hours without food and water, she was taken to a hospital.

‘What bothers me the most about those days is that I lost my youth,’ says Smisha, now a successful art entrepreneur. ‘Like every 20-year-old, all I wanted to do was wear pretty clothes and have an occasional outing with my husband. But I was doomed to wear those chiffon sarees and stay imprisoned in that kitchen.’

She confesses that though her husband is a kind and caring partner, he was a coward. ‘He could not stand up for his young wife though he knew his family was wrong.’

She owes her new life to art. ‘I considered ending my life several times, but I did not have the guts to do it. But every time I felt like the end of the world, I painted. Almost always, I could spare time only after midnight. So, I painted all night and showed up in the kitchen at 6:00 am.’

She says that it could be that helplessness that drove her to create one beautiful canvas after the other. She remembers the time when she was denied pocket money to buy herself some lingerie and laughs. ‘Today, I am not in talking terms with many of my tormentors, and those still in my life are dependent on me for finances.’

She agrees for most women in her times, it was a choice between self-respect and reputation. 'After our family broke, wherever I went, there were whispers. In one gathering, one woman walked up to me and called me a house breaker, loud enough for most around to hear. These remarks don't deter me anymore.'

In more than a decade since the launch of her label, she is still dependant on therapy. She says that every person carries the wounds of the youth within. Sometimes the wounded learn to live with the pain, and most times they struggle, but healing is rare.

Fear of the label

The three women discussed here are from across the economic hierarchy in society. Almost all women I spoke to for this work feared being labelled 'home wrecker' if they were to stand up to their abusers. A typical scenario of Pavlovian conditioning where for generations women were made to believe in holding the family together no matter the odds, even if it means putting up with abuse.

Another common issue was people not recognizing verbal and emotional abuse. Most women assume that abuse is only physical or sexual. Some even think that a spouse and elders in the family have every right to be rude. Their presumption is that seniority by age comes with a certain privilege. Hence, most cases of emotional and verbal abuse go unrecognized unless it crosses a threshold of extreme mistreatment. Even when women are aware, the family and friends discourage speaking about it unless it is physical.

In a society that functions by a dogma dictated by culture, abuse has to be revealed in the form of a physical wound or a scar; everything else is tolerable hurt. In such situations, the definition of abuse is a blur. For most women, it is a strong headache

that comes and goes, an ordeal only the one experiencing it knows, a pain that cannot be communicated.

It is the same conditioning that silenced me for many years until a friend I confided in told me what I was going through was verbal abuse. Thankfully for me, I was not living with my tormentor. Occasional visits were distressing, but I did not have the strength to refuse them for fear of my reputation.

My graduation, work experience and exposure did not come to my aid then. I was silenced for close to a decade until I gradually reclaimed my strength, thanks to my job that involved harnessing my creative energy. Those agonizing days felt like walking alone in the darkest of tunnels; it took me a long time to find that all along the light I was looking for was within me.



A content editor by profession, Monisha finds solace in words. Her essays have been published by New Asian Writing, The Curious Reader, Kitaab and Feminism in India. Her works of fiction have been published by Bengaluru Review, The Punch Magazine, Phenomenal Literature (Vol.4 No.1), Active Muse, Indian Ruminations, Asian Extracts, Storizen Magazine, and Jotted

Bhayvakirti – On Comfort

By: Bhavyakirti Singh

My graduation, work experience and exposure did not come to my aid then. I was silenced for close to a decade until I gradually reclaimed my strength, thanks to my job that involved harnessing my creative energy. Those agonizing days felt like walking alone in the darkest of tunnels; it took me a long time to find that all along the light I was looking for was within me.

The startle of a pressure cooker's whistle is universal. Volcanic smoke hisses from the rattling top and is silenced only with the sharp jab of hands sullied by years-worth of hot marks. Rajani's were the same. A few years ago, she was sitting before a chiromancer crowned by a red and yellow turban.

His confused grating on her fingers, his incantation of 'sister, sister!' and the rattling of his coin jar told her what she needed to know. The creases of natural folds on her fingers were indistinguishable from the silting of other shores. Lengthy rivers scaled the peaks of her palms, spilled down to elbows and puddled near her shoulders.

If the rattle of the cooker swirls one into a maladaptive state, its whistle brings one back to the present. It is the pulses that need attention today, not the tuck of cloth on sun-scarred scalps.

"Ma"

"Haan Shivani, I'm right here"

"Ma can I come for the weekend?"

"Of course"

Her daughter, newly married to an accountant two cities away, missed her mother dearly. She was first on the list of her frequently contacted, joining the ranks of phone numbers that sent her unreadably long WhatsApp forwards. Rajani shelved many messages in her archive as an early morning ritual, but made sure to react to her daughter's boilerplate texts. She remembered – she was cognizant of the alienation in a new home with an absent husband.

Her early days in the last century were marked by the ceremonial hazing of a fresh bride. Her mother-in-law stood over her shoulders at the kitchen slab, burning the sliced tomatoes with her laser-like pierce well before they were meant to broil on the stove. Her husband, tired of the flurry of faces in the day, didn't take very well to the nonsensical babble of another lady. At night, Rajani bolt her newly painted bathroom door and pointed a paint-stained finger at her red-eyed reflection in the mirror.

A few more days.

As freshmen ducks their heads in the hallways, she walked unnoticeably around the house. She had rote-learned her husband's daily routine. Every morning, the whistle of the 6 a.m. train roused her from her sleep. She warmed the milk, laid the paper and steamed the suit. In the evenings, she laid out peanuts for her husband and cold water for herself.

On a rainy winter day post the birth of her daughter, the arrival of her in-laws was announced at the house. Her husband lay on the diwan in the parlor, his fevering forehead dampened by the swatch of cold compress. Her mother-in-law rushed in to tend to her

sick son. Her hand travelled across his face delicately. Rajani remembered her own mother picking up shards of glass from near her infantile feet.

“It isn't tough to tend to a husband, if that's all one has to do.”

Rajani turned her gaze to the baby cradled in her lap, white and of the same malady as its father. She was ashamed. Embarrassment gave color to her cheeks. She checked again how many toes her daughter had.

The same evening, a pressure cooker burst in their kitchen. Her mother-in-law agonized in pain. The skin from her shoulders had melted onto her chest and yellow daaldripped from her arms like hot icing. Her husband hosed down his mother in cold spritzes and turned his trembling face towards his wife in the slow degree of a rusted compass.

Rajani waited for the trio to return from the dispensary late at night. The next morning, the blue veins on her pale skin were more prominent than one could have noticed before. She tended to her mother-in-law's wounds before breakfast and quietly locked herself into the bathroom after laying rotis in the casserole.

A few more days.

Like the sophomores burdened with class, Rajani's routine gave her no time to think. On contemplative weekends, she thought of absence. She prayed with each mug of her bath bucket in gratitude. Her life was comfortable, and for comfort, one must always pay a price.

Ten-year-old Shivani had wept profusely at her father's demise. His sudden stroke late at night took everyone by surprise. Rajani was now not a wife, and was unprepared to not be one. Holding her child's shoulder near the newly garlanded photograph of her husband, she angled her head sideways to match the tilt of the frame. It was new, gifted by a grieving relative she hadn't met before.

They must have been rich; the un-scraped price sticker assured the quality of wood and silver and its assembly in a foreign nation. She leaned closer to the wall for a long inhalation. Sandal and incense. Was it from the Puja? Or did Rajani need to doubt the veracity of claims stuck on to the back of her late husband's head? She had seen a similar frame at one of the hawker-shops outside the community temple.

Her mother-in-law lamented at his passing. She lamented as a mother on hearing the news. She lamented as the matriarch in her comments on their lack of an heir. She lamented as a manager in rationing out her son's earnings between herself and his wife. For the comfort Rajani had, her mother-in-law commented, one must always pay a price.

When Shivani complained about her in-laws the first time, her mother was amused. It's her house now, she must settle such matters internally.

"All mother-in-laws are insufferable. Your grandmother was, too. One has to adjust. One has to."

"I know. It's just very new."

Rajani had never let her daughter feel unwanted in the house. Her heart stung through the entire duration of the conversation. However, she could do nothing about it.

One must bear it as legacy, just as all other women do. Ceremonial hazing wears out, and Shivani's husband was a good man, from a reputed family. Her daughter would be a happy housewife, returning home for festivals and possibly gestation.

At her daughter's first Diwali as a married woman, Rajani received a happy invitation to her home. Celebrations common to her parents and in-laws were something she hadn't witnessed. She leapt at her chance to give it to her daughter. Her daughter's mother-in law, Janaki ji, stood erect and smiling at the door, her years as a distinguished professor hardened the creases of her saree that waved obediently in the slow rush of winter air.

Rajani thought the linen looked elegant, its golden borders matched the wire of her spectacles. Her un-jeweled ears and academic gait made her look more distinguished than she had known. She was pleased at her choice for her daughter's family, the real new age Indians, the modern intelligentsia.

Dinner was spectacular. Janaki ji was a pioneer of women's rights, the first female professor at her university, of some field in science and technology at that. She narrated tales of her tours to ancient universities abroad and offered to lug Rajani on any such forthcoming trips. Rajani's golden hoops clinked in excitement at such prospects.

She hadn't seen universities. The hustle of students outside class doors looked wonderous in films. She had been too busy to set up Shivani's room at the hostel, but Shivani hadn't been there too long, either. Rajani enjoyed the lively conversation.

“Your evenings here must be so fantastic beta.”

Janaki ji chimed in.

“They would be, if she liked to watch the news with us once in a while.”

Shivani's ears turned crimson. Rajani knew this was a subject of contention in the house. Shivani was embarrassed she was unable to contribute to the hot evening discussions before the television. Her mother-in-law thought she put her second-class degree to no use. She wondered how Shivani had managed to secure her diploma.

Shivani had complained about these questions to her mother in preceding conversations. Her mother told her that it was just a matter of time. In the corner, Shivani's husband had checked out of the happenings at the dinner table. His phone rang continuously, till he had to finally egress from the front door to attend to his office obligations.

As the dinner chatter dampened, Shivani escorted her mother to the front room for tea and sweets. No one followed them. Settling into the comfortable couch, Rajani heard the distinct click of a door bolt. She looked at her daughter in visible confusion.

“They like to converse privately sometimes.”

“Oh.”

Shivani's husband was still in the window, animatedly conversing with someone on the phone. His parents, sister and her husband had locked themselves into a room to maintain privacy of conversation. She sat outside with her blank-faced daughter, in her daughter's front room, with nothing to talk about. They must be talking about the nation's nuclear power. Rajani chided herself for thinking sarcastically about her daughter's family. They would warm up to her in due time. For comfort, door shutting was menial fee.

Her daughter's face was chalky white, her eyebrows knit together at the top of her nose. Rajani could suddenly feel the scent of her husband's shaving soap in the air.

Shivani's daughter was born soon after her third Diwali in her new house. Her mother came to visit her in the hospital's maternity ward, carrying sweets for her first grandchild. Shivani slept in the hospital bed, yellowed by the toil of labor, her collarbone poked the thin gown enveloping her.

Rajani looked at her grand-daughter sleeping in the hospital crib. The scent of a raw newborn was distinguishable, reeling her to her own daughter's happy birth. There was a disturbance in the air here, though – her son-in-law's absence was conspicuous. The nurse paraded in and out, updating Shivani's mother-in-law about the baby's health. She had been sitting in the waiting room outside, carefully creasing the pleats of her immaculately brown sari. The two mothers exchanged warm hugs and congratulations on the relational updates.

“A boy would have been nice.”

Rajani raised her eyebrows.

“Oh, no! I meant, I just had a naati. Would have been nice...”

Her sentence trailed off, froze and cracked in the chilly atmosphere of the hospital. Rajani passed an understanding nod. One must maintain friendly relations with the samdhans. She enquired about Shivani's health, referencing her frail and sickly frame.

“She doesn't eat much, Shivani. Women like to maintain their figures even through pregnancy these days, it seems.”

This was unlike the daughter Rajani had known, but she submitted to her mother-in-law's analysis. She would know better, Shivani lived in her son's house now.

Shivani arrived at her mother's door early on a Monday morning. Cradling her daughter in her skeletal frame, she dragged in bags with one hand and pressed the infant to her chest with the other. Her mother had just bathed, and was pleased to see Shivani and her grand-child. They spoke long about the fussing of the baby, counted her fingers and laid her to sleep before commencing breakfast.

“How long are you staying, beta?”

“Not sure, a while”

“Your husband?”

“He is still in France.”

“I had a nice chat with your mother-in-law the other day. We're planning a trip together.”

“I know. She was telling her friends about the uneducated lady she's taking.”

A silence settled between the duo. The clink of the metallic spoon against the ceramic plates as they stretched the meal was the only sound in the air.

“You look so weak, how are you breast-feeding properly? You don't eat much in a day?”

“Food is on the low, right now. Money is tight.”

Rajani was surprised. Her daughter's husband worked at a good job that paid well.

"I exhaust my budget soon, when he isn't around. It takes a while to get cooking as well."

"Budget?"

Shivani revealed her monthly allowances to her mother. Appalled, she wondered how one could run a household and remain healthy in the same.

"Why didn't you ask me for money?"

"No, Ma! Money is tight for me. I was irresponsible with money initially. We thought it would teach me to manage better if we budgeted."

Shivani looked starved – her skin taut against her forehead, eyes bulging in a cartoonish manner. Her long curly black hair was scattered at the back of her shirt, strands floating to the ground with every shake and shiver of her torso. The instinct of her mother raged at this arrangement, but she had to speak to Shivani's mother-in-law. She decided to discuss it cordially, with the tact of commercial negotiators at deals they wish to preserve. As soon as Shivani went to check on her daughter, her mother phoned the samdhan. Rajani's cold cordial greetings caught her counterpart by surprise.

"Is it right to budget a nursing mother, Janaki ji?"

"I wouldn't think so Rajani ji. However, Shivani has been irresponsible with her spending. My son works hard at his job to earn. She hasn't learned in a year and a half of budgeting!"

"A year and a half!"

“You must know of Shivani’s irresponsibility! We will assess and ration again once my son is back, though, don’t you worry.”

“When is he expected to be back, Shivani failed to mention.”

Janaki was silent for a brief moment. Rajani should have counted silences today.

“He’s just finishing up a project. It isn’t tough to take care of the husband’s hard earnings, if that’s all one has to do!”

Rajani’s ears rang with a sense of déjà-vu. For a second, she thought she could hear the chime of her own mother-in-law’s anklets against the floor.

At a cousin’s wedding in the cold of December, Shivani represented her household alone. Even her mother, a regular attendee of such family festivities, was absent, brought to bed with the rage of a winter fever. Shivani carried her babbling daughter in her arms, giving her the shimmery flowers embroidered on her shoulder pads to play with. In congratulating the new couple, she could feel the dribble of her daughter’s saliva on her neck. Her baby had dozed off even in the unforgiving noise of wedding drums.

Her relatives buzzed around her, complimenting the now-asleep baby’s features. Her nose looks just like yours, her chin is just like your father’s, she has gotten her eyes from your mother. They seemed to have almost forgotten that her baby had a father.

At the conclusion of such analysis, Shivani sat at a white draped table by the food counter, still clutching her daughter tightly to her chest. At last, when an aunt came to hold her daughter, Shivani readily handed her over. To the surprise of her aunt, Shivani

put her forehead against the tablecloth and almost immediately fell asleep in the midst of the throng, the crackers and the loud music.

On a sweaty Saturday afternoon, Rajani and Shivani ran into each other at the farmer's market. Rajani beckoned to her daughter in the midst of placing capsicum into the weighing bowl. Shivani, holding one thin plastic bag of potatoes in her hand, rejoiced and threw her hands into an embrace around her mother. As they detangled, Rajani felt a soft scrape at the back of her neck.

The gooseflesh that erupted were mnemonic to her early married days. She gently held her daughter's hand and placed it next to her own. The geometry was unforgiving, Shivani's fatigued hands closed up instinctively next to her mother's hardened and erect palms.

Rajani thought of the chiromancer again, and of her lack of access to palmistry. Shivani looked at her mother the same way Rajani had looked into the mirror for many years. The rims of eyes reddened together. Shivani thought of her daughter, whose eyes looked like her mother's, and her own. Would she find her here in a few years? Her mother clutched the wood of the vegetable handcart till her hands abraded with splinters. Shivani tugged her mother's hand away, dusted it and questioned with a trembling mouth.

“For comfort, one must always pay a price?”



Bhavyakirti Singh is an undergraduate law student, who has studied multiple courses on criminal law, family law, sociology and their intersection. Her poems and short stories have appeared in local dailies and journals such as ActiveMuse, The Bombay Review's student section and the Literary Impulse blog. She has participated as a young writer in festivals such as the CLS Literati and Valley of Words. Her debut poetry anthology is due to be published later this year. You can find some of her work on medium publications:

<https://bhavyakirti.medium.com/>

Tara - Chicken Ghee Roast

By: Tara Rajendran

I revolved in the consultant urologist's new ergonomic high chair, watching my indistinct reflections on the tinted dark glass foil of the glass wall partitioner. One outpatient cabin was partitioned into three cubicles using room partitioners for the chief consultant, the junior consultant, and the patient's physical examination.

The exam room is comparatively big and rectangular with a bed, double step stool, a hand basin, an intravenous stand, and a cupboard where we keep foleys catheters, urine bags, syringes, glove boxes, two large stainless steel canisters with sterilized gauze, saline bottles, kidney trays and a pack of surgical blades.

Only one house officer-medical student gets recruited to urology rotations, while the rest of the team has to be at the casualty. As casualty was more exciting, intense, and eventful, no one volunteered to rotate in Urology, and I was looking forward to pausing my life to allow my thoughts to settle, which were like a shaken-up soda can, ready to explode.

Lata, the urology department's help, always sat on the wobbling wooden stool inside the examination cubicle, without the fan, changing wallpapers on her feature phone. I had asked her to switch on the fan. It's inordinately warm these days. Maybe the in-charge of

Lata explicitly instructed not to use the facilities such as fan, air-condition, and tube lights unless there is a doctor in the room. Patients seldom came on Wednesday forenoon. It is the operating-room day, and all the consultants will be in the O.R. If

patients come to the outpatient room, I am asked to call the junior consultant for directions. Mostly they were post-surgery follow-up cases, and I could easily consult them by myself.

Lata is really helpful, and she somehow knows what I am looking for and will be extending me the glove box or foleys before asking. Lata ate lunch on the examination room floor with other helps from the nearby departments; ultrasound room, dermatology, and cardiology. They enjoyed boiled rice and pickles with gossips on soap opera stars.

The junior consultant and I rounded together in the evenings after the outpatient department closes at 4 PM. There is a gate at the inpatient floor entrance, where our middle-aged security guard without his cap sat and checked our identity cards; the board near him read, "Tender coconuts are not allowed inside wards."

The junior consultant taught me to remove the surgical sutures and foleys catheter. My white coat's pocket is filled with 10 mm and 5 mm syringes, one pair of gloves, and vacutainers; purple, red, and blue.

In most of my night terrors, I am stranded in the middle of the ocean, floating away from land. Vulnerable. Abandoned. Terrified.

A few minutes before the lunch break, the help from cardiology peeped in. The lady saw me on the consultant's chair, so she went back, only to peep in again after a few seconds. I noticed she covered her permanently scarred left side of the face as much as she could with her oily hair.

"Come in. No problem. There are no patients anyway."

She gleamed and went to meet Lata in the examination room with her steel lunch box and a few newspapers to sit on the floor.

"Doctor, would you like to join us?" Lata asked.

"Thank you for asking. I am not hungry. Please go ahead."

"Not hungry? How come? It's 2 PM. I did not see you drink tea or have snacks in the middle."

I walked out of the cubicle as they murmured behind me.

That afternoon we had one suture removal. There was white powder on my palms when I removed my gloves.

"Are you sad, doctor?" Lata stood at the entrance of my cubicle, and I switched on the air conditioner.

"Miserable"

"You can share with me, Doctor."

"That's so sweet of you, Lata, but I am not ready yet."

There is a patient to get admitted waiting in the casualty. I walked out and climbed the stairs down. Lata will not see the tears that fell on the stairs filled with dust and sand; I stamped them. The cardiology help climbed up.

Thursdays are grand rounds. Consultants and residents went to the next block to attend the robotic surgery C.M.E, and I walked back to the outpatient room.

The cardiology help peeped in repeatedly. Lata went out and invited her inside. Whispers, again.

"Doctor"

Lata did something that she never did before. Lata came in and sat in front of me on the patient's recently painted white stool.

"We have some neer dosa and Chicken ghee roast. Come please"

I was taken by surprise. Lata rose from her seat and waited for me smilingly.

It would be impolite to refuse. There was newspaper spread on the floor already, in the examination room. I washed my hands and was about to sit on the floor when the Cardiology help stopped me.

"No, no Doctor, not on the floor, on this table."

"I am going to sit with all of you on the floor."

There were eight tender milky white neer dosas made from rice batter. Chicken roasted in pure cow's ghee was as bright orange as a hessonite stone. The dish was garnished with cashew nuts and coriander leaves. I licked my fingers.

"From where did you order the ghee roast, Lata?"

"Order? No! This is Savitri's special!"

Savitri, the cardiology outpatient help, looked down and continued to eat.

We took selfies, and they insisted that I stand in the middle. Lata and Savitri filled my heart with a sense of belonging.

The afternoon was busy. I shuttled between the operating room, casualty, and the blood bank multiple times.

Lata was locking the door at 4 PM.

"It was all Savitri's plan. She thinks food is an instant mood lifter."

"That is exceptionally kind of her! And, I would like to ask you something. What happened to her face?"

"Oh, that! Her husband attacked her with acid a few years ago. He and his family were vitriolic towards Savitri, as she wasn't able to conceive."

"Did they assume so by themselves, or did they consult a doctor?"

"Madam, in villages, anything wrong that happens in the husband's house is assumed to be wrought by the wife. If the cows stop giving milk, the in-laws will blame us. If our mother-in-law falls sick, it's also us. That monster went to jail but came out in a few weeks. Men get away with things. It's us who has to suffer."

Lata deposited keys in the security guard's drawer and signed in the register.

"He remarried the next month. They did not have children either. But this time, that lady left him."

We walked out of the hospital together.

"By the way, I am on leave tomorrow; I have some work in the bank. Savitri is going to have a long day tomorrow running between urology and cardiology outpatient rooms."

I returned to the hospital late that evening. Two patients were absconded from the hospital. Nothing surprising. I wrote in the yellow discharge cards, 'ABSCONDED'.

"Savitri, thank you for preparing the chicken ghee roast for me yesterday! You shouldn't have done that." I knew it was really expensive for her to cook chicken. Savitri silently removed the wrappers of saline bottles and kept them on the cupboard. The sound of the ceiling fan filled the silence.

"Savitri"

"Yes, doctor."

"Can I tell you something?"

"Yes, doctor."

"I had got engaged three months ago."

"Congratulations"

"Only to break it up last month."

I continued.

"I believed in everything he said. I believed in him all these years. Three years. I eventually became someone who I am not. He convinced me that I am emotionally immature and I was just an average person. He convinced me that maybe the conservatory rejected my application because I wasn't good enough. He cheated on me with another woman. My self-worth was so low that I begged him to come back. I told him that I will fix everything. I lost a part of myself in the process, Savitri."

"Let it all come out." I was sniffing loudly. Savitri patted on my back consolingly.

"That individual has also promised he would stand up and whistle for me as I receive my degree. I can not believe how freakingly naive I was!!"

I washed my face as a patient walked in.

"What's a conservatory?"

"Oh, sorry, it's like a college."

"What were you hoping to study there?"

"Dance. Contemporary dance."

"Like breakdance?"

I spat out the water I was drinking.

"Oh no. Not breakdance. It is a mixture of classical and modern dancing."

Savitri had never heard of that before.

"I like the elements of unpredictability in it. It's nuanced, layered, and experimental."

Savitri continued to look flummoxed. I will never know whether she was actually perplexed or she was deflecting me to something that I was passionate about. I showed her a video of me dancing.

"I was trained for a decade before taking a sabbatical. I had to focus on medical school. Since I am graduating next month, I was aiming to take a course in contemporary dance for two years."

"You don't want to study dancing anymore?"

"I do! It's just that...my application got rejected, and now I don't have confidence."

"Is that the only place that teaches this kind of dance?"

"No, there are plenty. He told me that I mustn't try in other universities as they are way out of my league."

"He was gaslighting you, doctor. Try not to see yourself as a reflection of other's opinions. Do all the things you were afraid to try because of this individual. Maybe you will find your old self in the process, Madam."

"Padma. My name is Padma."

"Wow. Do you know the meaning of your name.?"

"Lotus?"

"Emerge from the mud, Padma"

Cardiology resident came to call Savitri to help the technician with the E.C.G.

I took a few minutes to sink that in and then walked towards the cardiology O.P.D. and hugged her. Patients and residents watched in surprise.

"Behind the temple, there is a banyan tree. From the banyan tree, take a right turn. The third house with a huge mango tree in front."

The Rickshaw driver accelerated through the untarred road. Savitri was waiting in front of her home. Savitri unhooked my dupatta that got stuck in the bougainvillea thorn fencing. Magenta pink odorless paper-like flowers blossoms and bright green leaves crowded the thorn fence.

"I have already kept the chicken pieces for marination to save some time."

"Thank you, Savitri, for inviting me home. I tried everything, went out with friends, watched movies, and shopped a lot, but nothing really helped me move on. Let us try if cooking helps."

"Padma, moving on is not something that happens like switching off a light bulb. Can you pluck some curry leaves from the backyard for me?"

Savitri has a small kitchen garden with tomatoes, ladyfingers, eggplant, and curry leaves. I never knew tomato leaves are fragrant. She was right. Cooking is similar to meditation. While dicing the garlic into tiny pieces, you are really present at that very moment. You are aware of the air that you breathe in and out.

"Tamarind paste on the top of the cupboard. Transparent bottle."

"May I ask you something?"

"Aha"

"Have you completely healed emotionally ?"

"Healing is an ongoing process, Padma. I was married off to that man just because he did not ask for dowry. My parents never really kept in touch with me after the wedding. I knew my husband and his family were highly misogynistic and abusive. I was subservient because my parents won't take me back. I had no choice. My co-sister and I attended a beautician course together. She was really empathetic. We were in the same boat almost."

Savitri roasted dry red chillies, fenugreek seeds, cumin seeds, coriander seeds, cloves, and peppercorns. She cooks in the old Indian firewood stove made of three cup-shaped stones. The golden amber flames emanating from the firewood licked the black cast iron cooking pot from all sides.

"Did you curse him in your mind, ever?"

"I think the bigger problem was I did not have an income to bring food to my table. I almost begged people for a job. The treatment charges were so kindly settled by the N.G.O. through fundraisers. It took so many months of my life. The parlor I worked for had already replaced me with someone else. I was hungry, Padma, for weeks. I ate once a day or sometimes once in two days.

That's when Lata helped me secure a temporary position here, in the hospital. A few months ago, I was reflecting on my life. I think I am just so grateful for this second chance. The doctors who saved me, the N.G.O. activists who raised fund for me, the generosity of the people for donating money, my co-sister who introduced me to the

beautician course, the parlor where I discovered my passion, Lata, this job, the cardiology consultants who are so kind to me and the people here in the hospital who never judged me for my scars and our small circle of friends. So thankful!"

I sniffed the warm vapors from the pot. I swallowed the saliva that rushed into my mouth. Savitri dripped a drop of the gravy in the center of her palm to taste.

"Hmm, perfect." She said to herself.

I washed two stainless steel plates and kept them on the floor. We sat on the cold red-oxide floor, cross-legged.

"I hope I get accepted into the conservatory. Maybe I need a super happy or proud moment in life to completely move on from this phase."

I tore the soft neer dosa and grasped a huge piece of chicken ghee roast. Savitri Said.

"Don't restrict your happiness to only monumental events in life, Padma."

Savitri had a cat and three kittens. I never imagined watching the kittens play with their mothers wagging tail will be so cathartic.

"Would you like to shape your eyebrows?"

"No one is going to look at me, anyway."

"You are unbelievable! Come sit on the veranda step; I will get the thread and scissors."

Savitri shaped my eyebrows.

"Wow, done? So fast? It wasn't painful at all! You are really good at this?!"

Savitri smiled.

"Savitri, it is my convocation next week. My family is coming over. Would you be my guest at the ceremony, please?"

Perhaps, it is the first time that Savitri was invited to a ceremony. Savitri was reluctant to even visit temples as children often cried looking at her. But the convocation will have only doctors. Most of the faces she is familiar with.

I gave the guest entry token to Savitri.

"Here, I have reserved the seat for you near my parents and sister. They are on the right side, row 16, A, B, C, and D."

"I have to run now." I ran, holding my tassel. But I ran back at the same speed.

"Also, I got accepted into a premier conservatory in London, Savitri!!" She hugged me tightly for two seconds.

The Dean started his commencement address. Savitri sat in 16D.

"Padma mentioned you were working as a beautician before. For how many years did you work at the parlor?"

Kamala asked Savitri without taking eyes off the graduation dais.

"Seven years. I have also completed a beautician course. It was a small parlor, but they had all the latest facilities. I used to do threading, pedicure, manicure, facial, hair spa, hair cut, hair coloring, hair styling. I had the best time of my life at the parlor."

The doctors were called to the Dias by their names to receive their degrees. The gallery reverberated with rapturous applause.

"Would you be interested in getting back as a beautician?"

"Parlors need pretty girls as beauticians. I was mocked on several occasions when I tried to search for jobs at parlors."

"Savitri, I am opening a boutique beauty salon. We would like to have you there."

Savitri was stunned for a minute.

" Dr. Padma Mehrotra" Dean announced. Savitri stood up, clapped, and whistled.



Tara Rajendran, is a Physician-Classical Musician-Author- and TEDx speaker. She was the top 15 national finalists for the Rhodes scholarship '18 standing as the top 1.2 percentile of undergraduate students of India, for her academic brilliance, outstanding extracurricular achievements, & leadership qualities. In 2020, 'LinktheDots' named Tara as one of the '20 brilliant Indians in their 20s'. Tara is a published short story writer. Her works have appeared in 'Blood and Thunder' (Oklahoma University, United States), Nymphs Publication-London, ActiveMuse among others. She also holds a bachelor's and Master's degree in 'Saraswati Veena' and is currently a Ph.D. student in Music and her dissertation focuses on the evolution of the use of Indian classical music in medicine.



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