

SHORT STORY

The Skeleton

NARENDRA MAURYA (translated and adapted from the Hindi by S. Mahnowar)

I had just stepped into the house when father announced, 'Your mother is gone!' It did not take me long to understand what he had meant by 'gone.' We knew that mother was dying. It had been a lingering death, stalking her moment by moment. We had spared no pains in nursing her but she did not have much faith in medicines. And in such a situation, how much help could an unemployed son provide? She had kept insisting throughout that there was nothing wrong with her. 'One is bound to have a cough in old age,' she would say. 'Tell me, do you know of any cure for old age?'

I stood there stunned, silently observing her dead body. Father closed the door. 'Have you thought of it?' he said dropping his voice to a whisper. 'Of all our friends and acquaintances there is not one to whom we don't owe money...'

He fell silent. Father had run up huge debts to provide for my education, among other things. And then there had been a long spell of unemployment. We had many relatives who had doled out money to father just because he was a good man and they could not refuse him. But there is a limit to everything. How could he go on asking for money on the basis of being a good man?

'Today we are in no position to observe the rites enjoined by society,' he said. 'I know tongues will wag. And we can't stop them, can we? I've thought of a way out...'

Then his voice seemed to fail him—like a heavily-loaded truck breaking down when making a steep climb.

'What is it that you wanted to tell me?' I asked.

'We shall bury your mother in the back room.'

I was agast.

'Your mother is gone,' he said. 'Only the dust remains. Let her dust merge into dust. I can't think of any other alternative.'

I could see that he had to gather all his strength to utter these words. And the tremor in his voice was evidence that he was expecting stiff opposition from me. I was indeed appalled at his suggestion. My wife intervened: 'When our neighbours don't see her in the morning...?'

'I've thought of that too, Bahu,' father said. 'I'll take the night train to visit Deepu. If anybody asks tell them that father and mother have gone to visit Deepu Bhaiyya.'

Without further ado, father started breaking the floor. In two hours we had dug a sufficiently deep hole, in which I laid mother to her final rest. We accomplished the job by ten. We felt that along with mother we also buried our age-old hallowed traditions.

Exhausted, our minds empty, we sat down in the front room. After a while, father put his things in a cloth bag and set out from home. I saw him take long strides into the darkness. We spent the remaining part of the night gazing at the walls of the room. I heard a voice in my head saying, 'Your mother is dead. You must cry.' I tried but failed, unable to lighten the burden of my heart.

In the morning the desolation in the house started to get on my nerves.

I was also worried about father. Getting down from the train, he must have worked his way through the crowd and reached Deepu's house utterly tired. Deepu's house was no better than a hovel. Deepu and his wife, father knew, would not be happy at his sudden appearance. Life was already such a hard grind for them and father would be painfully aware that he would be adding to their burden. But he could do nothing about it.

My wife was silent. Sometimes silences can drive a wedge between two intimate people. Then at last she got absorbed in her daily chores.

After an interminable wait, father's efforts eventually bore fruit. I got the job of a low-grade teacher in a private school. I immediately wrote to father and Deepu Bhaiyya conveying the good news. My wife went about telling the neighbours the epic role father had played in getting the job for me. Being privately run, the school could not adequately

meet its expenses. My salary was not worth talking about. So after a full day's work, in the evening I had to go to the school principal's house to coach his children.

Hearing that I had gotten a job all our creditors came to congratulate me, which was in fact a clever way of reminding me that we owed them money. Those who were previously content with getting back their principal amount now wanted interest too. One of them told me that he had recently met father in Nagpur. He was a doing a part-time accounts job in a small business establishment. The news did not make me happy. His broken spectacles were lying in my table drawer. He could not work without glasses for it caused him a headache. It made me realize all the more how useless I was.

The next day I wrote to father: 'At your age it does not look nice for you to work,' I wrote to him. 'If you don't feel comfortable there you had better come home. I have managed to get some tuitions on the side. If you want, I can send you some money so that you can buy a new pair of glasses.'

Prompt came the reply: 'My eyesight is quite good. Rather than sending me money you would do well to start paying off our debts. My clothes are almost in tatters. I'll try to buy new ones next month. I'll be getting ninety rupees. Not bad for the kind of work that I'm doing. Take care of your health.'

Three days later there was a letter from Bhabhi: 'Big cities mean big expenses. We have instalment payments against the purchase of a scooter. If we don't pay those on time it will be a slur on his name. Father has a job at ninety rupees a month. But how far can that go? Now that you have started earning you should send us some money to help with father's maintenance.'

At night when I returned home my wife would be asleep. I would sit down to my meal and try to force the ice-cold food down my throat. Later I would feel like vomiting. I would gulp down some water and crawl into the bed. My wife would be wearing her threadbare sari and patched-up blouse. I would feel disheartened at the sight.

I was a bit free on Sundays. I would buy the provisions for the coming week and take a leisurely bath. We would also indulge in the extravagance of having a vegetable curry along with the daily daal. In the evening my wife would wear a freshly-washed sari and strive to look attractive. But not even the thick kajal could hide the shadows under her eyes. On those nights I would be the first to go to bed. My wife would follow me and lie down by my side. After a while instead of the soul-less, low-grade teacher there would be only a man --numbed beyond any desires and worries--sliding into a deep slumber.

Gradually everything fell into a routine: on the first of the month I would pay the instalments of my creditors from my salary and tuition fees. With the money that remained I would formulate the current month's budget. My wife would tell me that apart from Monday and Wednesday she would add one more day to her schedule of weekly



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fasting. She thought that by scraping and scrounging in this manner she would be able to reduce expenses. But the expenses always spilled over.

There was another letter from Bhabhi. She wanted me to call father or send money to cover his expenses. I was hurt. I felt that she had written this letter on her own without taking Deepu Bhaiyya into confidence. Over the last six months or so I had appreciably reduced my debts. Hence I decided to invite father to stay with me.

I discussed the matter with my wife long into the night. To my delight, my wife came up with a practical suggestion. We had some giant-sized brass utensils which grandfather had bought long ago for cooking on festive occasions. Why not sell them off? We did so, and they fetched money much beyond our expectations. I wrote to father to return home.

Father came soon enough. Though he looked tired and thin, he was actually quite happy because all his debts had been paid off. A huge load was off his head.

I was soon to complete three years of my service with the school. During this period our living had more or less stabilized. Father was feeling more relaxed and easy. He would spend his time gossiping with the other retired people of the mohalla. My wife would sometimes observe as many as three 'Sundays' in a week.

Then I noticed a change in my wife. When I asked her she smiled. 'Don't pretend to be so innocent,' she said. 'Don't you know I'm three months gone?' I got a jolt. My wife was pregnant and I didn't know about it. We had been married seven years and we had never talked on this subject. I was as much thrilled as surprised.

Father had also come to know about it. He started to fetch the pitchers of water from the tap himself, and would not allow my wife to wash his clothes. Sometimes he would call the nurse from the government hospital to give her a check-up. In the school, besides teaching, I had also to attend to some office work as a result of which I came home late. One day I was specifically asked to come home early. But when I reached home at seven-thirty I found the door locked. Our neighbour told me that Aunt Lachchi and father had taken my wife to the hospital. I hurried there and found father strolling in the compound. He looked worried. Father told me that the child was in the breech position and that the doctors were trying to bring it to the normal position. If they did not succeed they would have to take recourse to surgery in the morning. It had to be a Caesarian and the operation would cost a thousand rupees.

We gaped at each other. A thousand rupees! Where was the money to come from? And it had to be paid the first thing in the morning. I had already arranged for three hundred rupees. But what about the rest?

I saw a friend emerging from the hospital. His wife had delivered the day before. He told me that a new doctor had recently set up his

clinic near the Town Hall. We would do well to consult him for he was said to be a competent gynaecologist and may be able to suggest a way out without recourse to surgery.

Leaving Aunt Lachchi behind we rushed from the hospital to meet the new doctor. There was a light inside the clinic, which meant he was in, but we could hear people talking inside and therefore waited for them to come out.

'Yaar, you must be showy,' someone was advising the doctor. 'Unless you do that your practice will not pick up. Put up a nice signboard. Display surgical instruments in the almira for effect. Put a human skeleton in a showcase. Dr. Basudev of Bhopal has done it. We will spread the word that the new doctor is a genius.'

'Yes, these days geniuses are not born, they are created!' the doctor quipped. 'But where do I get a skeleton?'

'You can get one easily for a thousand or fifteen hundred rupees.'

Father, who had been hearing all this, pressed my hand and we moved away without meeting the doctor. I walked behind him like an automaton. Upon reaching home father lighted the lamp.

'Vibhu, the new doctor wants a skeleton,' father said. 'He'll pay fifteen hundred rupees for it. We have got a skeleton—your mother's.'

I looked at father in stricken amazement. 'Father, it's a sacrilege even to think of such a thing.'

'Don't be a fool. A skeleton is just like dust. But if it can bring someone on the verge of death back to life...well, I can tell you it's not a bad bargain.'

I was dead against the proposition. We had not performed any rites at mother's death. And now father wanted to sell her bones.

'I'll not have it!' I protested. 'Even if my wife is saved she will wallow in remorse all her life.'

'Vibhu, you seem to lack brains. Do you think that if some Brahmins perform *'shraddh'*, it'll bring salvation to the dear departed? If your wife dies these very people who won't help you with a single paisa will make a show of mourning, come on the days of mourningand do nothing but eat, eat, and eat.'

It was for the first time that I was having an argument with father, and it brought tears to my eyes.

'Vibhu, it's a question of an operation,' father insisted, 'and its solution lies in a skeleton.'

He got up and started digging the floor of the back room. As if in a trance, I also lent him a helping hand. It took us about four hours to dig out the skeleton and clean it up. Asking me to go to the hospital he stayed back, waiting for the appropriate time when he would deliver the skeleton to the new doctor and report back at the hospital.

The nurse of the maternity ward was out in the verandah. Aunt Lachchi was also sitting on the floor. 'What's the delay?' I asked her. I was told that the surgeon who was to perform the operation was out of station and was expected any moment.

Then father came. He placed a wad of crisp currency notes in my hand. Mother's face suddenly rose before my eyes. Just then the surgeon arrived and went in to examine my wife who had been readied for the operation. Aunt also followed him. To my dismay I saw the surgeon coming out. Aunt, who was behind him, was crying. My wife too was 'gone.'

In grief, we brought her dead body home on a push-cart.

Father said, 'Vibhu, it is a strange custom that we should be celebrating the death of one who had all her life lived in neglect and penury. Those who had not a word of sympathy for her will join in the celebration, posing as if they are very close to us. These abominable customs, are we going to observe them?'

'No, never,' I reply.

Father had the push cart stopped outside the door of our house. He went in and came back with a pick-axe, a shovel and an empty, hollow receptacle. Placing them on the push-cart he trudged alongside the cart. I followed him close at his heels.

Narendra Maurya is a prominent writer in Hindi. S. Mahnowar is a poet/translator.

BookReview

BookReviews

Just Between Us: Women Speak about their Writing

REBECCA SULTANA

Edited Ammu Joseph, Vasanth Kannabiran, Ritu Menon, Gouri Salvi and Volga; Women's World India/Asmita Resource Centre for Women; 2004; 367 pp; Rs. 350.

Writers interviewed: 1. Shashi Deshpande (English). 2. Sara Joseph (Malayalam). 3. Jeelani Bano (Urdu). 4. Imtiaz Dharkar (English). 5. Alka Saraogi (Hindi). 6. Bani Basu (Bengali). 7. Gauri Deshpande (Marathi). 8. Vaidehi (Kannada). 9. Neelesh Raghuwanshi (Hindi). 10. Manisha Joshi (Gujrati). 11. Shahjahanra (Telugu). 12. Maritreyi Pushpa (Hindi). 13. Jupaka Subhadra (Telugu). 14. Githa Hiranyan (Malayalam). 15. Rajani Parulekar (Marathi). 16. B.M. Zuhara (Malayalam). 17. Varsha Adalja (Gujarati). 18. Sugatha Kumari (Malayalam).

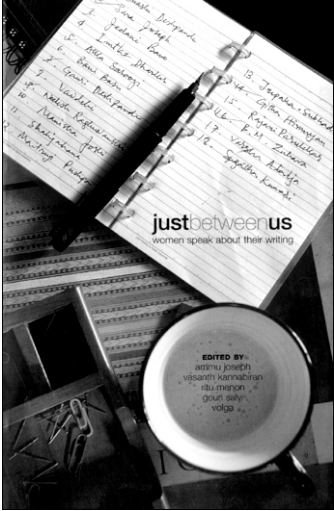
The book is a collection of interviews of the above eighteen award-winning Indian women writers currently writing either in English or in one of its regional languages. It was published jointly by Asmita Resource Centre for Women (which works to empower women and promote sustainable development and peace), and Women's World (a network of feminist writers that focuses on issues relating to gender based censorship). In 2001 Women's World had undertaken a ten-language partnership project with Asmita involving two hundred writers. The project's goals were to build a network of women writers who would provide solidarity and support to one another as well as facilitate the creation of alternative forums for women's writing and publishing. The project also intended to aid in producing gender-sensitive material; to analyze how, and when, particular forms of censorship operate; and to resist threats to freedom of expression by religious groups or the state. An anthology of women's writing in Urdu has also resulted from this collaboration.

The book not only introduces the writers but, more than that, provides the context for each of

these women's taking pen to paper. They come from every social strata and region of India, from the privileged background of Imtiaz Dharker to a member of the Malayalam Christian minority (Sarah Joseph) being a writer having to live in a *chawl*. Individual tones range from conciliatory (Jeelani Bano) to seething (Sara Joseph). All the writers interviewed have one thing in common: the theme of social injustice towards women and the condemnation of institutional and societal gender bias. Most acknowledge themselves as feminist writers although all have different interpretations for the term.

Other writers, not included in the book, have long been doing similar work. Mahasweta Devi, for example, has written about women. But perhaps she is more recognized as a writer of subaltern issues than as a feminist writer per se when she combines women's causes with political movements. Nevertheless, the female characters in Devi's short stories *Draupadi* and *Stanyadayini*, among others, evolve into strong individuals. This book is also an addition to a plethora of information in different mediums, from websites to anthologies to journals, on Indian or South Asian writing. I found this book informative in that, apart from Shashi Deshpande, I was unacquainted with the other writers writing in the many regional languages of India.

What I found particularly interesting are ideas presented about the craft of writing itself. Although some of them started since their childhood, most began writing only after their children had grown up. It was either to fill the void of an empty nest, or to reckon with a gradually disappearing self-identity amidst a joint family. Taking pen to paper proved not only therapeutic, but became a medium through which to vent pent up anger. As Deshpande says 'I write because I am angry or unhappy about something.' I found Shashi Deshpande's interview particularly interesting. She writes in English, a lan-



guage, as mentioned in the preface, spoken only by two percent of the population in India yet one that can fetch worldwide recognition.

Shashi Deshpande's experience with writing in English ('I thought the only people who could exist in English were the Johns and the Mary's') will strike chords with anyone who has attempted to write about South Asian characters in English, or tried to read English books translated into Bangla. Even after producing two novels Deshpande felt that she was consciously translating Indian culture into English. It was only after writing her third one that she became more at ease. Each writer has different work habits and practices. While Jeelani Bano or Imtiaz Dharker find mixing of marriage and writing quite workable, Sara Joseph thinks marriage robs one's individuality. Rajani Parulekar started writing only after the break-up of her traumatic marriage. For all, a supportive family is greatly conducive to writing.

All of them agree with the importance of upholding a woman's perspective. Virginia Woolf's concept of an androgynous writing is not feasible when one is beset with conflicts that only a woman could identify and which a man would tend to overlook. A particular event materializes into two different

versions depending on who chooses to tell it. None can be termed as being the more authentic. But as often happens with women's writing, being termed 'feminist' can prove to be counter-productive since it tends to narrowly, and unfairly, pigeon-hole their work. This is the dilemma long faced by many Indian woman writers. Traditionally, if they stepped out of the boundaries drawn by men they were ignored, sidelined or silenced. Yet if they chose to speak their mind they would come out as loud and shrill. Happily, the trend is changing. Many women authors are now expressing themselves freely on a variety of themes. The coming of foreign publishers such as Penguin and Harper Collins to India has provided South Asian women writers a much-needed opportunity and a platform. When Shashi Deshpande wanted to publish her first novel, *Roots and Shadows*, there was hardly any multinational publishing house to whom to send her manuscript. But after 1980, 'publication was no problem.'

These writers lay bare their souls, their heart-aches and pleasures. On a personal note, it is revealing to see that many had problematic relationships with their mothers. Mothers were often not role models, simply by being too entrenched in the dominant ideology of being a submissive wife and a dutiful. To a daughter, bursting with ideas and intending to change the world, such a model of subdued domesticity could not be a kindred spirit. Daughters, ironically enough, turned towards their fathers as the harbingers of modern ideas. To Deshpande, her mother connoted domesticity, a figure completely in the background. Interestingly enough, such has been true in other cultures as well whenever the newer generation of women searched for a stronger figure to emulate within the household. Adrienne Rich has written: 'It is a painful fact that a nurturing father, who replaces rather than complements a mother, must be loved at the mother's expense, what-

ever the reasons for the mother's absences.'

Finally, I would like to comment on a disturbingly common trend of taking pot-shots at particular religions as being the sole villain in female subjugation. Among the three Muslim writers in this volume, two blame Islam for their sidelined status. Shahjahanra decries the constraints she faced as a Muslim woman. Yet earlier in her interview she denies the influence of Islam on her upbringing, never having been taught the Koran or having been forced to pray. Complaints of oppressive Islamic customs from her sound forced and one wonders, not for the first time, if religion is not being exploited as a convenient whipping boy, or as a conspicuous platform for agitation. A judicious look into patriarchal laws, lack of education and superstition within the communities would go a long way in dispelling popular misperceptions and stereotypes regarding Muslim, or Hindu, or Christian women's status, as well as to engage in serious debates on gender and religion.

Over the years and throughout the political instability which has affected Indian society at large, along with innumerable other influences which have affected culture, language and social patterns, women's literature in India has evolved to show common experiences, a sense of sisterhood and a range of female experiences that question the recurring face of patriarchy. Dom Moraes once said in an interview about women writers, 'Their themes are really feminine, close to the home and hearth.' Though women writers do reveal a spectacular absorption in these domestic situations, their writings these days often go beyond 'hearth and home'. This book is a good read for the general reader as well the academic.

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I AM A TERRORIST

TENZIN TSUNDUE

I am a terrorist.
I like to kill.

I have horns,
two fangs
and a dragonfly tail.

Chased away from my home,
hiding from fear,
saving my life,
doors slammed on my face,

justice constantly denied,
patience is tested
on television, battered
in front of the silent majority
pushed against the wall,
from that dead end
I have returned.



artwork by amia

I am the humiliation
you gulped down
with flattened nose.

I am the shame
you buried in darkness.

I am a terrorist
shoot me down.

Cowardice and fear
I left behind
in the valley
among the meowly cats
and lapping dogs.

I am single,
I have nothing
to lose.

I am a bullet
I do not think

from the tin shell
I leap for that thrilling
2-second life
and die with the dead.

I am the life
you left behind.

Tenzin Tsundue is the leading Tibetan English-language poet-in-exile. His book of poems is entitled *Crossing the Border*. He is also a prominent activist in the cause of Tibet's freedom from Chinese occupation. The above poem was submitted to The Daily Star for publication.