

SHORT STORY

Penalty

PREMCHAND
(translated by D. Rubin)

Scarcely a month ever went by without Alarakkhi having some fine deducted from her pay. Once in a while she would actually get five of her six rupees; but though she put up with just about anything she had managed not to let Khan Sahib put his hands on her. Munshi Khairat Ali Khan was the Inspector of Sanitation and hundreds of sweeper women depended on him. He was good-hearted and well thought of—not the sort who cut their pay, scolded them or fined them. But he went on regularly rebuking and punishing Alarakkhi. She was not a shirker, nor saucy or slovenly; she was also not at all bad-looking. During these chilly days she would be out with her broom before it was light and go on assiduously sweeping the road until nine. But all the same, she would be penalized. Huseni, her husband, would help her with work too when he found the chance, but it was in Alarakkhi's fate that she was going to be fined. For others payday was an occasion to celebrate, for Alarakkhi it was a time to weep. On that day it was as though her heart had broken. Who could tell how much would be deducted? Like students awaiting the results of their examinations, over and over again she would speculate on the amount of the deduction.

Whenever she got tired that she'd sit down a moment to catch her breath, precisely then the Inspector would arrive riding in his *ekka*. No matter how much she'd say, 'Please, Excellency, I'll go back to work again,' he would jot her name down in his book without listening. A few days later the very same thing would happen again. If she bought a few pennies worth of candy from the sweets-vendor and started to eat it, just at that moment the Inspector would drop on her from the devil knew where and once more write her name down in his book. Where could he have been hiding? The minute she began to rest the least bit he was upon her like an evil spirit. If he wrote her name down on only two days how much would the penalty be then? God only knew! More than eight annas? If only it weren't a whole rupee! With her head bowed she'd go to collect her pay and find even more deducted than she'd estimated. Taking her money with trembling hands she'd go home, her eyes full of tears. There was no one to turn to, no one who'd listen, where the Inspector was concerned.

Today was pay-day again. The past month her un-weaned daughter had been suffering from coughing and fever. The weather had been exceptionally cold. Partly because of the cold, partly because of the little girl's crying she was kept awake the whole night. Several times she'd come to work late. Khan Sahib had noted down her name, and this time she would be fined half her pay. But if it were only half it would be a blessing. It was impossible to say how much might be deducted. Early in the morning she picked up the baby, took her broom and went out to the street. But the naughty creature wouldn't let her be put down. Time after time Alarakkhi would threaten her with the arrival of the Inspector. 'He's



on his way and he'll beat me and as for you, he'll cut off your nose and ears!' The child was willing to sacrifice her nose and ears but not to be put down. At last, when Alarakkhi had failed to make her quiet with threats and coaxing alike, she set her down and left her crying and wailing while she started to sweep. But the little wretch wouldn't sit in one place to cry her heart out; she crawled after her mother time and time again, caught her sari, clung to her legs, then walloped around on the ground and a moment later sat up to start crying again.

'Shut up!' Alarakkhi said, brandishing the broom. 'If you don't, I'll hit you with the broom and that'll be the end of you. That bastard of an Inspector's going to show up at any moment.'

She had hardly got the words out of her mouth when Inspector Khairat Ali Khan dismounted from his bicycle directly in front of her, she turned pale, her heart began to thump. 'Oh God, may

my head fall off if he heard me! Right in front of me and I didn't see him. Who could tell he'd come on his bicycle today? He's always come in his *ekka*.' The blood froze in her veins, she stood holding the broom as though paralyzed.

Angrily the Inspector said, 'Why do you drag the kid after you to work? Why didn't you leave it at home?'

'She's sick, Excellency,' Alarakkhi said timidly. 'Who's at home to leave her with?'

'What's the matter with her?' 'She has a fever, *huzoor*.'

'And you make her cry by leaving her? don't you care if she lives or dies?'

'How can I do my work if I carry her?'

'Why don't you ask for leave?'

'If my pay is cut, *huzoor*, what will we have to live on?'

'Pick her up and take her home.'

When Huseni comes back send him here to finish the sweeping.'

She picked up the baby and was about to go when he asked, 'Why were you abusing me?'

Alarakkhi felt all her breath knocked out of her, if you'd cut her there wouldn't have been any blood, trembling she said, 'No, *huzoor*, may my head fall off if I was abusing you.'

And she burst into tears.

In the evening Huseni and Alarakkhi went to collect her pay. She was very downcast.

'Why so sad?' Huseni tried to console her. 'The pay's going to be cut, so let them cut it. I swear on your life from now on I won't touch another drop of booze or toddy.'

'I'm afraid I'm fired. Damn my tongue! How could I...'

'If you're fired, then you're fired, but let Allah be merciful to him. Why go on crying about it?'

'You've made me come for nothing. Everyone of those women will laugh at me.'

'If he's fired you, won't we ask on what grounds? And who heard you abuse him? Can there be so much injustice that he can fire anyone he pleases? If I'm not heard I'll complain to the *panchayat*, I'll beat my head on the headman's gate...'

'If our people stuck together like that would Khan Sahib ever dare fine us so much?'

Book Reviews

The Voices of Rebati's Sisters

RUMANA SIDDIQUE

Early Women's Writing in Orissa, 1899-1950: A Lost Tradition (edited by Sachidananda Mohanty). Sage Publications, New Delhi/Thousand Oaks/ London; 2005; pp 241. Rs 550.

In 1898 the generally acknowledged father of modern Oriya fiction Fakir Mohan Senapati, in the first ever short story published in the Oriya language, created Rebati. This female protagonist, by displaying a forbidden desire for learning, seems to invite misfortune on herself and her community. Fakir Mohan's Rebati became an icon and her story an allegory for female education and emancipation. The narrative heralds the coming of age of a new breed of women who learned to write and create a literature of their own in Orissa. They became, in effect, Rebati's sisters.

Although the tradition has continued, the processes of gender bias and literary domination by other kinds of discourses have pushed these works into near oblivion. In this recent collection, based on extensive archival research, Sachidananda Mohanty brings to light the translated writings of twenty Oriya women from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These women, unlike the fairly well-known literary women of Bengal, are little known writers. Mohanty refers to them as 'literary domestics', women who found themselves in a domestic setting and yet had literary aspirations. Mohanty clarifies that this term carries no derogatory connotation but is merely a statement of fact of the condition literary women found themselves in during the middle of the 19th century.

The selection presents the variety of forms employed by these women writers: short stories, poems, essays, travel writing, novels, and letters. Their writings, coming primarily from the domestic context, also interface with the history of many progressive movements in Orissa, such as the rise of female education, trade movements and women's participation in civic and political life. Their interpretations of the cultural, political and ideological issues of their times provide valuable insights into the condition of Oriya women of the period.

The book articulates polyphonic voices speaking to women, urging them to empower themselves, coaxing them to speak, to write, to tell their stories. The process of writing, which implies education, is identified by nearly all the writers as the key to empowerment. Again and again through prose and verse, they urge women to break their silence. In poems like *The Sound of Silence*, Reba Ray (1876-1957) condemns this silence as a denial of human rights. She attempts to provoke women into action with lines like:

*In silence I came to this world
And my life will sing unceasing,
In silence will my life forever
Her songs of silence sing.*

These writers, who can be classified with the early feminists, make every effort to expose this silence as imposed by a patriarchal society.

Reba Ray's feminist lines provide a characteristic example:

*Silent, shorn of strength is woman
Beside a man forever strong
When she can't even cry for You
For fear of loud-voiced man so long.*

Haripriya Devi (1915-1996) in her poems *Tears and Woman, the Prisoner* continues this vein of posing provocative questions like:

*When there is a body
Must it not have free mind?*

*Will she remain a prisoner forever?
On what right do you imprison her, this woman?*

Their poetry often tends to have spiritual undertones as prayer was possibly a means of some release for women. This is characterized by the works of Reba Ray and Nirmala Devi (1906-1986). Relating the struggle to establish literary aspirations with the rights of women to education, the poet Bidyut Prabha Devi (1926-1977) tries to inspire a defiance of social restrictions in the poem *The Assault*:

*The grinding is half done
Where are you
Eldest daughter in-law?*

*How can there be in all this,
Time for poetry?
Today it's the son's health.
And tomorrow, it's
The daughter's stomach ailment*

*Let people say what they like
I shall go on flowing*

*Writing is the balm
For all my pain.*

The poetry encapsulates the emotional turmoil of balancing stereotypical social roles and individual creative urges and rights. With recurrent images of darkness, imprisonment and silence, the poems seem to carry deeply philosophical and existential undertones.

If the poetry versifies humiliation, the prose attempts to break down the parameters within which women were confined, using logic, argument and inspiration. Sarala Devi (1904-1986), the first Oriya woman to take part in Gandhi's 'Satyagraha Movement' and consequently jailed, exposes the plight of women in the feudal and patriarchal society. In her piece *The Rights of Women*, Sarala outlines a manifesto for women's empowerment.

Comparable to Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, what is impressive is her extraordinary reading into contemporary history, law and social life in India and abroad.

Like Sarala, her contemporary Kuntala Kumari Sabat (1901-1938) was also an emancipator, activist and literary artist who expressed extensively in prose and poetry her concerns for the plight of her homeland *Utkal*, the freedom of India and the cause of women's emancipation. She spoke out in many forums for the empowerment of women and the collection presents one of her speeches *The Crisis of Religion in Modern Times* as well as an excerpt from one of her novels which illustrates

Early Women's Writings in Orissa, 1898-1950: A Lost Tradition



her empathy for the dispossessed and underdogs in society. Kuntala's writing makes an important statement at the national level and was undoubtedly a source of great inspiration for many literary women in Orissa. Her successors who expounded powerful poetry and prose that centred round the themes of women's experiences during the partition and in the post-independence period include Shakuntala Devi, Sushila Devi, Nandini Panigrahi, Urmila Devi, Malati Choudhury, and Hemalata Mansingh. Their literature dealt with social realities such as industrialisation, poverty, exile, widow remarriage and all the symptomatic effects of women trapped in a patriarchal order.

Other literary women like Sailabala Das (1875-1968), the first Oriya woman to travel to England for higher studies, presents in her travel writing piece a female perspective on travel and a view of colonial India seen from Britain. The contributions of these literary domestics have indeed not been totally unrecognized. Basanta Kumari Pattaikai was the first Oriya woman to receive the highest award of the Orissa Sahitya Akademi, the 'Atibadi Puraskar'. The works of these women from Sailabala's writing in the early 19th century down to Basanta Kumari Pattaikai writing in the late 20th century and all their contemporaries mark milestones in a journey down a road that Basanta's excerpted text most aptly provides the title for- *The Untrodden Path*.

Sachidananda Mohanty professes that his assessment of texts for the selection has been objective and not hagiographic. By including texts like travel notes, speeches and letters as well as fiction and poetry in his selection he aims to show the extraordinary range of interests of these literary women. The choice of texts also attempt to show how the Oriya literary women responded to the issues and ideologies of their times and the linkages that existed among them. A linkage that can indeed be defined as a sisterhood.

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'Life changes in the instant'

FARAH AMEEN

The Year of Magical Thinking by Joan Didion; Alfred A. Knopf; 2005; 227 pages; \$23.95 (hardcover)

"Life changes fast. Life changes in the instant. You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends. The question of self-pity." With these words, Joan Didion begins *The Year of Magical Thinking*, for which she just received the National Book Award for non-fiction. In this memoir, the author chronicles her thoughts, her feelings, her vulnerability after her husband, the writer John Gregory Dunne, died on December 30, 2003, while she was preparing their dinner. That evening, the couple had returned from visiting their daughter, Quintana Dunne Michael, who'd suddenly fallen gravely ill and was in hospital; she died this August.

This book gives us glimpses into a 40-year marriage—with all the good and the bad parts—and the life the couple shared with their adopted daughter. For much of the book, the author is with her daughter in the hospital, trying to keep her "safe," constantly hoping she will recover. But forces beyond her control are at work. Didion said that writing was her attempt to make sense of the "weeks and then months that cut loose any fixed idea I ever had about death, about illness... about marriage and children and memory... about the shallowness of sanity, about life itself."

As the writer tries to come to terms with her husband's death, there is a sense of wanting to turn back the clock. She constantly reflects on the details of what happened the night Dunne died—they came home from the hospital, she built a fire, fixed him a drink and started making dinner—as if to reach a point where his death could be avoided. And with the passage of time, Didion finds she cannot escape her pain—whenever she goes someplace she'd been with John or Quintana, she is haunted by memories, unable to enjoy the present.

The closeness Didion and Dunne shared is apparent in the minute details. Except for a brief period when they were first married, the couple worked together in their New York City apartment every day. Each morning, they'd wake up and go for a walk in Central Park. They followed different routes, but made sure their paths intersected at a certain point so they could have breakfast together, usually outside. Then they'd go home and start writing in their separate offices, consulting each other as necessary and reading each other's drafts. They'd break for lunch, and then work through the afternoon. In the evening, they'd usually go out to eat. Didion said they never seemed to get tired of each other's company.

Apart from its sheer cathartic nature, this book is for anyone who has dealt with the death of a loved one, especially a spouse. Didion says that people who'd recently lost

feel the same--what she felt then was "a sadness, loneliness... regret for time gone by, for things unsaid... But this time grief was different for her. "Grief has no distance... comes in waves and paroxysms, sudden apprehensions that weaken the knee and blind the eyes and obliterate the dailiness of life." Didion talks about trying to go through daily rituals--waking up in bed and wondering why she was alone, and then remembering, "I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day."

Didion says she did not want to finish writing this book, because it would mean finishing the year and finding some resolution. She talks about how her image of John "at the instant of his death will become less immediate, less raw... more remote..."

What she concludes is what most people have experienced: "I know why we try to keep the dead alive; we try to keep them alive in order to keep them with us... If we are to live ourselves there comes a point at which we must relinquish the dead, let them go, keep them dead."

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Like A Tree-Root, Alone

SHAKTI CHATTAPADHYA
(translated by Sonia Amin)

The quiet fire in his head drove him mad
Sits in a hole he dug thoughtful as a tree-root
White wood-mites, other pretty, patterned insects

Close by him--not human habitats--
They have gone to temple and dais
He too has a prayer, he too has a speech
Temples mosques institutions insects have none
No creed or ideology
They hover about the madman, who
Sits absorbed, like a tree-root,
alone.

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The stars were watched

ZAIN ALI

our shoes ate asphalt
that night
when the entire city
stretched, like a cat
on the roof

rich, sad smoke
kissed and sucked
at windows, longingly,
the roads burnt
with a thousand yellow eyes.

neon angel's blood,
transcendent and luminous,
pulsed
through billboards

and the stars
were tiny diamonds
with mouths
that told stories.

the stars were watched
that night,
as our shoes
ate the roof.

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