Monowara and her Daughter

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THE harshness of winter makes Monowara Khatun of Kurigram, Rangpur remember her only daughter Marjina. Marjina lives in a village with her husband not too far away but fate has created an abyss between them that Monowara finds difficult to circumvent. No matter how her heart bleeds to see her only daughter she checks the impulse thinking about her happiness.

Her story begins in one such cold month in a village of Kurigram, where winter comes with all its cruel manifestations in the lives of the poverty-stricken people. One such manifestation is scarcity of work and food. And when there is scarcity of food, men eat most of what is available and women have to pretend to have eaten and look happy. If they cannot do that then they get thrown out of their husbands' house.

Monowara could not pretend long and to end her misery found a job in the house of a rich person from Rangpur who ran a business in Chittagong. The family was kind and they took good care of her. She began to send all her salary to her husband so that her nine-year old son and eight-year old daughter could have two square meals a day.

Monowara could not keep track of time as she was illiterate. She could only tell by the falling of tree leaves when winter came and went. Winter always opened the floodgates of memory for her, most of which was not pleasant. But thankfully winter in Chittagong was not so unkind on people.

Once every year she goes to her own village but she never goes to her son-in-law's house. The abyss between them has grown wider over the years. She lost her only daughter to poverty. Today she only prays for her daughter's well-being in the silence of the night when no one would see her tears.

Monowara longed to see her children and hear them call her ma...but she never let the master or his family members see her tears that she quietly shed remembering them. She held on to the job so that her son could go to school and her daughter had something to eat at night. Winter nights tend to last longer especially when one's stomach remains empty.

Many times the master promised to take her to her village but every time he had to go there with his business partners. She had to wait for the next time. She waited patiently. Often she would look out the window of her little room and wonder how big her son and daughter might have grown by then. Then one day she had the opportunity to visit her family after three years. She was thankful to her master for giving her the opportunity. She was back in Chittagong after a week to work and send money to her husband to take good care of her children. Three more winters came and went. Monowara noticed more gray hairs in her head.

One day she received a letter from her village in which her husband wrote that he had married her daughter off with a good boy in a nearby village. The daughter was getting taller at the age of thirteen. And that was the right age for marriage in the poverty-stricken society in Kurigram, Rangpur. They were rich people and would take good care of her daughter. She would have three square meals every day.

Monowara cried in silence. How time flew! Her little daughter was someone's wife now! That night she prayed for her daughter's happiness. More winters went by and one day she was allowed to go to her village for a week. Reaching home she asked her husband about her daughter. He told her that she was fine. She ate well and looked very beautiful. Monowara could hardly wait for the sun to rise the next morning. She would go to the village and meet her daughter. They started soon after having some breakfast. She made sure that she had taken the plastic bangles and a red cotton saree that she had brought with her from Chittagong. She could not afford anything more.

Her daughter looked like a stranger to her. She looked well-fed and fairer. She had a child in her lap. Her very own grand-daughter! Monowara wept openly. Only if she could be near her daughter during childbirth, she sighed. Her son-in-law came and sat beside her daughter. But his father and mother went inside after meeting Monowara. They did not offer her to stay back for lunch. In their society they would not let a relation go without taking a meal. The father owned plenty of land and he was a community leader. He did not like to tell people that her daughter-in-law's mother worked as a maid in some house in Chittagong. He made it clear that Monowara should not embarrass him before his people with her presence. Monowara was deeply hurt. She caressed her daughter and her grand-daughter and started for her home. From the doorway she turned and requested her son-in-law to let her daughter visit her once as she would leave in a week. Her daughter never came.

Monowara now works in a house in Dhaka. Ten more winters have gone by since the day she had last seen her daughter. Once every year she goes to her own village but she never goes to her son-in-law's house. The abyss between them has grown wider over the years. She lost her only daughter to poverty. Today she only prays for her daughter's well-being in the silence of the night when no one would see her tears.

(Based on a true story)