

EDITOR'S  
NOTE

Today's SLR starts with the story of a woman who became a mother, fell into being a maid, all in the hope of being...a woman. Then we have the discovery of spices in the air and beauty everywhere, checking off items on the bucket list. We end with a pair of poems about love-to-be and love-that-is-lost. Today's SLR is, in short, a mere glance at life. As Pedro Calderon de la Barca put it: "What is life? A madness. What is life? An illusion, a shadow, a story. And the greatest good is little enough; for all life is a dream, and dreams themselves are only dreams."

Munize Manzur  
Editor

# THE MAID WITH FOUR DAUGHTERS

S.M.Shahrukh

She is dark complexioned, a little on the skinny side and of medium height. She works as a charwoman at our place, coming to work around noon and leaving late in the afternoon when the sun starts dipping in the west. She is probably in her middle forties considering her claims that she was about one year old during the war of independence in 1971. She could be older, who knows, but I tend to believe her since the atrocities of that war never got wiped out of the memories of millions of its sufferers; her mother remembers with vivid imagery, she often claims.

The year of 1971, as Dickens put in his famous novel, was the best of times and the worst of times for the eastern Bengal. It was during that year that the landmass became independent from the tyranny of the big bully brother but at what a horrendous cost! The brutal assault on the land left millions dead and hundreds of thousands of women, both young and old, raped by the enemy. At the end though emancipation came and a golden sun came up, a sun tinged with splatters of the red of blood. The most glorious chapter of East Bengal was etched with the brush strokes that painted everything red. She was a toddler during that tumultuous year of mayhem.

I see her watching television with our live-in cook, who is about sixty years old. Both of them sitting with plates full of rice and some heavily

spiced vegetable or fish curry with the accompaniment of four or five green chillies on each plate; the chillies look fat, vengeful, hot with anger. They watch saccharine soaps on television while munching anger, as if, from the heat of the green serpentine "monsters". They do not show their disillusionment with life while watching the tableau presented to them but they laugh at the folly of some characters, cry sometimes at their demise and they sigh; nobody knows the workings of their minds when they hold a breath longer than usual and then slowly release it, making the exhalation sound like a litany of all the untold grief in a person's mind. They become vocal, at times, to give vent to their assessment of whatever goes on in the television soaps.

The dark complexioned charwoman lives in a shanty, more like a lean-to; her hovel clinging like a parasitic plant on the wall of an empty plot owned by some rich man. The owner of the plot allows her family and three others, with their own lean-tos, to stay with the condition that they take turns keeping an eye on his precious plot and keep it from any illegal intrusions by land grabbers, addicts or other riff-raff.

Her lean-to is a ramshackle arrangement using bamboo, square frames that use cross-stitching of cane fiber and plastic sheeting. How the structure holds on is an engineering miracle of sorts. She lives with her



husband and two of her four daughters. Yes, she has four daughters. When queried as to why she has so many children with a husband who pulls a rickshaw, health

permitting, thus forcing her to work at two different places as charwoman, she gives a blank stare of disbelief. Pressed for an answer, she states the obvious, "We wanted a son who

would keep the 'family name' lit, of course!'" Almost like an unquenchable flame, I thought with dismay and some anger. She kept having babies till almost forty; her youngest is about six years old. The child bearing stopped when her body gave notice after the fourth pregnancy. She looks anemic and complains, often, of an unending fatigue; she has never mentioned the failed pregnancies and miscarriages which seems very likely to have happened in her long quest of looking for the illusive son.

She has married off two of her daughters, thereby incurring heavy debts. We hear eternally of her husband's illness which makes him stay home more often than not. He could be an addict but she never reveals much. Addiction is rampant among the dwellers of the slums. The disappointments of life become too much to bear, at times, with a mind that is too sober to process the heartaches and hence the false colours of drugs are eagerly sought. Poverty, social conditioning about the family structure, the resulting disappointments, the inability to cope and the relatively easy availability of drugs form a vicious circle.

She comes to work sometimes with a fat lip or a blackened eye; her eternal excuse is that she fell and hurt herself. On these days she is found working with a face grimmer than usual; she gives the mother-like cook lashes of her acid tongue without any

provocation. It is obvious that once again a fight has ended with her 'sick' husband resorting to his 'masculine prowess'. Men are often wont to do just that in the slums. The workings of the minds of the "social animal" remain a big mystery to many.

On the days that she fights with her neighbours, she is extremely vocal; extolling the virtues of the ones who stood by her during the fight and damning to eternal hell the ones who locked horns with her. Strangely, I find that she seems to be in a better mood, after the initial vocal display, she likes the vent of frustrations that these fights provide; probably she would feel better if she could take a machete to chop down her adversary.

She keeps watching the never-ending saga of an urban family, living in a different city, different country, following a different religion, and a backdrop she finds foreign yet fascinating. The soaps they watch are from the West Bengal province of India. She delays going home as much as possible; she even falls asleep. She does not want to face the life waiting there but the inevitable remains unavoidable. The cook falls asleep too, as if, in empathy maybe in sympathy. The cook has a son who has married recently. She has been slaving to provide him for his upkeep and education; he hardly calls to ask about her well-being any more.

Is that a sigh I hear from the two sleeping women? Simultaneously?

TWO POEMS BY  
FARAH NAZ

## A Lover's Stanza

My heart has no other desire  
But to fulfill the need of love;  
The most cherished feelings of time,  
The unconditional ecstasy of life,  
The ethereal spring of creation.  
Timeless, boundless and full of chasm  
Immortal sentiment – I must recall!  
Poet's ambrosial expression,  
Diva's passionate mantra,  
Danseur's delightful prom.  
Pedagogue's enlightenment,  
Sage's words of wisdoms,  
Beloved's dainty idealism.  
Mystic ballad of nature – I opt to call!  
My soul has no other dream  
But to cherish this reverie of life.

~

## Bemoan, My Beloved

We listen to the invincible Achilles  
moaning for his long lost love...  
He stood grieving over  
the grave of his Beloved...  
And he recalled how much  
she wished that love in his eyes  
reached the lips once in a while...  
To his dismay, she left silently  
without a word, without a whine;  
only with soft moans of pain  
with a bleeding heart...  
And the love that changed the world  
today that love stands destitute  
amidst the crowd.

~



PHOTO: SABRINA ISLAM

## Bucket List: The Kerala Journal Sarba Sugandhi – the Spice of All Trades

Sabrina Islam

Today we are heading to Thekkady. The Periyar forests of Thekkady has one of the best wildlife reserves and spice plantations, as well as treks and walks for the adventurous. As we leave Kottayam, we cross a number of beautiful churches. Kottayam has a large Christian population. The whole place is spotlessly clean! The homesteads, large or small, road sides, rivers and canals. No garbage strewn around. Somehow, I don't feel I am in India. My exposure to India has mostly been in the north and in West Bengal. I keep thinking I am in Sri Lanka.

Funnily enough, Das – my driver – says, "Ma'am, this place not same like India. It like difaarent country. We're clean peepal. Ewry indijual you vill find heppy and ismiling."

I agree, shaking my head sideways. We drive through Ponkunnam – hilly winding roads, rubber plantations, churches, markets, bridges, exquisite Kerala style homes. We pass brightly dressed women, mosques, temples. Heaps of bananas, orange coloured coconuts and banana plantations. There are also

waterfalls on the way although now they are dry. The long and winding roads remind me of Murray and Musoorie. As always, Tagore comes to my mind:

*Thou hast made me known to friends  
whom I knew not*

*Thou hast given me seats in homes not my own.*

I am ever grateful to Robi Thakur for having written lines for every occasion and every emotion I encounter. What would I do without him?

It doesn't seem like a good idea to stop on the curvy roads to take pictures. So we pull over at a less hilly spot, by a road-side I for coffee and photos. As we go higher, the view is absolutely breathtaking. All around me are lush green tea gardens, rubber plantations and spice plantations. The air smells of spices.

After a three-hour long drive, we arrive in Thekkady. At the Spice Village resort, my 'hut' room is lovely and has a very modern bathroom with a roof! No air-conditioning, but I actually feel a bit chilly. It's around 3500 to 4000 feet above sea level. The eco-friendly resort has lots of

spice trees and guinea fowl. These birds are noisy! Two guinea fowl outside my room are having a major husband-wife argument. I hope it doesn't kill my feeling of Zen.

There are many activities here in Thekkady to choose from. I sit in the garden with a fresh lime soda and chalk out my itinerary. First, I head out for the spice plantation. Geeta, the guide at the plantation introduces me to an amazing variety of spices and herbal plants. I had no idea that vanilla needs manual pollination, or that the outer layer of the cinnamon tree bark is straight, spicier and good for cooking, while the rolled cinnamon bark from the inner layer is sweeter, and hence used for cakes and desserts.

I also didn't know that 'All Spice' is one tree and its leaves smell of five different types of garam masala! It's called 'Sarba Sugandhi'. What a beautiful name!

I discover Bollywood's secret recipe for blood. The 'Bleeding Berry' is a tiny red pearl-like fruit which "bleeds" like real blood when squeezed! Then there's

rosemary, cardamom, cloves, green pepper, bay leaf. The list is endless. At the end I feel like 'Tilo', the character from 'Mistress of Spices' by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.

Back at the resort, I go to my room to rest. A church service is going on nearby. It must be some special occasion. The Malayalam gospel is incredibly melodious, like a South Indian raga. Thus musing, I fall asleep at some point when the sudden knocking of housekeeping makes me wake up with a jolt. For a moment I think it is already morning and ask the staff member what time they will serve breakfast. Then the time and place hits me. Slowly, I sink back into Zen mode.

Evening time I hear enchanting songs and able beats outside my room. In the garden, two stunning South Indian belles are performing classical dances, Kuchipudi and Mohiniyattam – dance of the enchantress. Enchanting indeed! Watching them, I feel excited about my visit tomorrow to the Periyar Tiger Reserve. My camera is all set. All I have to do now is to perform a 'Mohiniyattam' to enchant the tiger to come see me.