



FICTION

The Goat from the Other Side of the River

SHAH TAZRIAN ASHRAFI

the door.

"Sir, can I talk to you in private? It's about Asma."

His eyebrows deepen.

"OK give me half an hour," he says.

The bell cries and we all head out to the vendor who provides us midday meals. Our school didn't have a midday program until the number of drop outs beefed up. Ten minutes pass by and we head back to the class again.

Usually, school ends when the sun is cruel.

Most of us don't have the energy to walk then. However, I sow the seeds of courage inside me and head out for home without giving the distance a second thought. Under the harsh summer heat, I keep perspiring and walking. At a stretch of 20 minutes, I don't stop. Am I trying to beat the god of sun or the harshness of an infertile land? I sit on a

his eyes for some seconds.

"But what, sir?"

"She's getting married," words instantly slip out of his tongue. He then quickens his pace, and disappears into the distance. I keep sitting there without any shock.

It's appalling to neither me nor the residents of my village that once in a while some of the students disappear. The fact catches our attention strongly only when our class teacher does the roll call. They disappear due to a myriad of reasons. Some of them take drugs, some marry early, some elope and run away from home, etc.

I didn't know Asma. But I used to see her almost every day on the front bench. She had the highest Math score last month. Once when the teacher asked each of us about our aim in life, I

get ready to wear a red veil over her head, cake her face, adorn her hair with bridal flowers and hide her agony behind a docile face. In the eyes of the law, she was still a child. How could one basically get married and sustain the burdens that come with it at only 15?

Maybe she was that goat from the other side of the river, and her guardians were like that heavy man. She was firm on the ground. But they tugged harder, and her feet couldn't resist. She yielded. Her dreams dissipated into the clouds like the unending screams of the goat from where even birds couldn't catch them.

In my village, the impact of child marriage and other social doctrines are so grave that dreaming of equality may as well be blasphemy. Innumerable girls are deprived of their right to complete their education; misogyny plays quite an active role. A whole new generation suffers from beliefs that promote inequality. Eventually, disparity influences hatred, and getting married early only invites trouble. Additionally, many teenage mothers can't run their households with their grown-up husbands as villages aren't that financially sound. Ultimately, they marry off their daughters by the time they are teenagers owing to the belief as old as time that girls are burdens. The same story is repeated as upcoming generations accept the idea of misogyny. And with misogyny, comes the continual repression of women's rights.

It's not right when one's sister has to think more than twice before closing her eyes to dream. It's not right when one's daughter has to constantly stay worried about conceiving at an age when she's still a child. It's not right when wedding proposals are forced upon an adolescent female as if it's more like a law than a proposal. Proposals are supposed to be optional, right?

Do wedding necklaces actually shine throughout a child bride's life or chain her neck? Is a wedding veil more powerful than a school bag? Can a village where child marriage is something happening all the time ever fortify itself with the bricks of education? How can peace co-exist with life-threatening dogmas? If I become a teacher, can I encourage many other teenage females to dream and succeed in becoming one?

I have an ocean of questions. Even the sun would fail to dry them up.

Shah Tazrian Ashrafi is a grade 11 student of Birshreshtha Noor Mohammad Public College. This story was awarded a bronze medal in The Queen's Commonwealth Essay Competition 2017, organized by The Royal Commonwealth Society. The theme of the competition -- peace.

bench under the mahogany tree on the other side of the hospital. I lie down on my school bag and try to rest for a while. My throat is parched. However, I don't have the money to buy a water bottle, but even if I did, there are no shops around where I could do so. Minutes go by. Someone offers me a bottle of cold water. I angle my head upward, and see that it's my class teacher.

"Drink, Shafiq," he says. I devour almost the whole bottle like a drought-affected dessert quenching its thirst upon the touch of a mob of rain drops.

He laughs at the scene and gently waves my sweaty hair with a white cloth.

"What did he say, sir?"

I ask directly.

"Who?" he raises his left eye brow.

"Today someone came to you to talk about Asma, right?" - I inquire.

"Oh, yes. But..."

He puts his glasses down and rubs

had listened carefully to her answer. She had said that she wanted to be a pilot and drift in the wind. She wanted to be independent.

A month has passed. Now when I think about her, it hurts me so. It's not only Asma. Thousands of girls from many villages all over my country get robbed of their desires, succumbing to taboos and not being able to fulfill their dreams. I am a 15 year old, and I, without any hesitation, can play football across the street, go wherever I want to and hope to become whatever I want to be.

She was 15 too. At an age when she was supposed to play in the valleys and grow wings in her fantasy, she had to think about the burden of a marriage instead of completing her education and finding the key to a better life. Instead of ironing her school uniform, tidying her hair for school, buying pencils for homework and painting her future with shades of velvet, she had to

"Roll 23....!!!"

Nobody answers.

"Roll 23....!!!"

Now he gets furious.

"Ro..."

He can't finish. Someone knocks on

the door.

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