STAR WEEKEND

ften in conversations people bring up the difference between the words "home" and "house", or in our case, the difference between "bari" and "basha".

In my teens and as a young adult, I found it difficult to make out the differences. But now as a mother of two young boys, with a few experiences behind me, I have decided to sit down and write of the differences that make my childhood house a home and everything in between a house.

My house on busy Eskaton Road is where I was born some 40 years back, where I have spent my entire childhood with over 15 relatives, where all the happiness I have known is concentrated.

In the four-storey, white house located in the capital, we used to live on the first two floors, complete with seven bedrooms, a big hall, a dining room, a living room, and my favourite place of all, an open terrace. Here, we played hide-and-seek, *ful toka*, *ranna-bati*, with my sisters, cousins and aunts, everyone in tow.

The terrace was big enough to house a beautiful garden, which was surrounded by large trees like coconut, bay leaf, betel nut, jackfruit, lychee, guava and jamrul. Under the shadow of the trees, my dada (grandfather) used to sit on a chair to spend time before lunch. Dadi sometimes kept him company, but on most days, she was always busy with something or the other, like cutting vegetables or cleaning rice.

I hardly remember having lunch or dinner without guests, which would mean both my maternal and paternal relatives. The mood in the house was always festive, especially if it was Thursday. All our aunts and cousins would stay the night at our house. *Amma* sometimes had to send my *choto kaka* and his gang to the rooftop as the house was full.

In that house, there was never any way to get some studying done, which was a great relief for me as I was the classic "fakibaaj". My mother would make calls to all the relatives to ensure nobody visited after I got my exam routine. But that surprisingly never stopped anyone from coming to our house anyway.

Every activity in that house was a public affair. Afternoon tea would be served on the terrace where all the family members would gather and sit on shitolpati (mat) and engage in raucous adda.

These were times when we had no generators or IPS, not even a charger. We used candles and *hariken* during power cuts, or as we Bangladeshis call it, loadshedding. As soon as the electricity went off, we would close our books and move to the terrace. We particularly loved power cuts after 10 pm because that was when *baba* would sit with us and recite his favourite poems. The one I most vividly remember now is "Kobor" by Palli Kabi Jashimuddin. With tears in his eyes, he would recite the seminal poem. A mysterious feeling would grip us when we saw him like this.

Till the age of three, I slept in the same room as my parents. But once, two of my sisters got married, my younger sibling

## THOUGHTS ON THE CHILDHOOD HOME

**FARHANA AHMED** 

After they shifted, my niece and nephew fell sick often. Their health deteriorated more and more. My four-year-old niece used to tell my mother, "Dadumoni chlolo amra amader ager bashay jai. Ei bashata ektu o bhalo na." My sister used to say that she was upset every evening.

MUSINGS

After four years, the newly constructed house is now ready to move into. Everyone is relieved. I am too. For them. I can feel the joy of getting a new home.



IMAGE: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

and I finally got the chance to shift to one of the biggest rooms of the house.

I occupied the "best" side of the room and set up my table in front of a window from where I could see the backyard of the neighbouring house, with its multitude of trees. I still cannot forget the Eucalyptus, which emanated a minty clean fragrance every time it rained.

After I married and moved in with my in-laws, who lived near by, I used to go over to our house frequently. And every time I entered my room, I got nostalgic as pictures of my childhood rushed into my mind.

Then finally, a few years back *Baba* called a meeting to discuss a very important issue: the reconstruction of the house. One by one, each of us tried to discourage *Baba*, saying he was too old to take the hassle of constructing a new house.

But was I really worried about his age? No, I said what I said because I did not want to lose my childhood home

I never felt like going to our house anymore once *Amma* started packing to move to a rented house nearby. I did not go. It hurt too much.

I went to visit the new house for the first time recently. It is well-designed, with a beautiful terrace as well. But as soon as I stepped inside, I felt that it no longer belongs to me.

I got frustrated and left. I didn't say a word, but could feel an empty space in my heart. I felt like I had lost my home.

But maybe it is time for my niece and nephew and the younger generation of my family to spend their beautiful childhood and make a new home and new memories in their hearts.

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## PERSPECTIVE

uch like buying a free-size robe that needs no trial, motherhood is expected to fit all women who give birth. When it comes to ascriptions, much to the woe of a mother, the common image is that of a demigod, no less. She is envisioned as possessing a super blend of unconditional love, sacrifice, patience and strength. "But shouldn't that make us mothers feel good?" you might ask. I would say, no! For motherhood calls for skills that some women excel in—but not all, and certainly not me!

I grew up with an ubiquitous image of a super woman for a mother, so much so that when I was about to become a mother, I thought that the transformation would be automatic. As I waited in anticipation to be turned into a multitasking demigod from a bundle of weak nerves that, in reality, I was, the impossibility of such a transformation soon dawned on me. I'm infamous for my fainting feats. The mere sight of blood unnerves me. I prefer not to make hospital visits. All my visits to dentists have resulted, to my utter embarrassment, in me passing out, mostly in fear. My pain threshold is extremely low. My body has been reiterating a standard response to any medical interventions (including nose piercing and that too in my 30s)—switching off temporarily. With so many obvious anomalies, I couldn't understand how I was going to fit the bill at all.

Despite all these contrary feelings, my pregnancy went very smoothly. My body was at peace with the bump. I had no major health issues during most of my pregnancy and my obstetrician was expecting a normal delivery. Now, that was a problem too. I have grown up listening to numerous horror stories of the terrible pain of child birth. But, more than anything, what was worrying for me was the thought that I would pass out midway to a normal delivery. I had nightmares every other night and they became more frequent as the delivery date drew closer! I was certain I was going to die—and I could not die alone in a foreign land! A year and a half through my PhD then, I decided to put everything to an abrupt halt and to go back home to die amidst family.

I don't even remember having serious food cravings as was customary with expecting mothers. My non-craving was disappointing for me! "Why is my body not acting like that of a mother?" I would wonder often. Little did I know that it was just the beginning. With a sudden turn of events, my pregnancy hit the climax as the umbilical cord got all wrapped around the foetus and it stopped moving inside me. It was that very night that I went for a C-section. I didn't know what was coming except that a surge of extreme fear engulfed me from all sides. As I was being taken away on a moving bed for the dreaded procedure, they allowed me to see my family through a small window—for the last time, I thought to myself. I was certain that the end was near. The anaesthetist was trying to talk me out of my nervousness as I shivered like a dried leaf. I saw the dome with flushing lights coming down and the doctors with masks circling in. In that cold operation theatre, I thought I had reached the

netherworld in my full senses.

It was over quite quickly. And there was my son, a full month early, and way before I could realise the gravity of the matter. Again, unlike a mother, I don't remember having been swept by heavenly joy. To be very honest, I felt nothing! In my anaesthetic-induced state, the only thing that came to my mind later was: am I alive? I have been repeatedly told that the cherubic face of my newborn will make me forget all the pain and trauma of childbirth. It didn't.

Thank you, people, for misleading me. I remember every detail and the excruciating pain too. I still go numb at the thought of that first walk from the hospital bed to the toilet, the catheter being pulled out, the pain from swollen breasts. "This is not what being a mother is supposed to be like! I'm supposed to be above all these! I'm supposed to be happy!" I thought.

happy!" I thought.

Life was never the same again. I hadn't slept for months. I hardly had time to eat proper meals. My life revolved around feeding, cleaning up the soiled kathas in piles. In addition to all these, my son suffered from a chronic colic disorder that made him scream at the top of his voice starting from midnight. It was a strange ailment that I neither understood nor knew how to alleviate. It made me feel even more helpless.

Amidst this frenzy, I did not think of my own mental breakdown as something needing attention. I went through terrible postpartum trauma, without any diagnosis or help. I hated everything about my life. There was a time I even felt suicidal. I remember watching my son cry and staring at him helplessly, doing nothing. Motherhood was anything but welcoming and I was anything but happy. It was then too that I was guilt-ridden for not feeling motherly love. I hated myself for not being able to withstand everything.

"Why is the so-called transformation not kicking in?" I thought. Maybe I was not fit to be a mother in the first place! Beset by billowing, contrary emotions, including a feeling of inadequacy, and the resulting emotional instability, I cringed every day a little bit more into my own cocoon and damaged almost all

## BEING AN UNOTHERLY MOTHER

my social relationships by not acknowledging this. Even worse, I pretended to be happy. I pretended to like all this madness; I pretended to be that image of the mother.

In those darkest hours, I remember desperately but secretly praying to God to take me away from all this chaos. I

desperately but secretly praying to God to take me away from all this chaos. I was so ashamed of myself for feeling and behaving in such an unmotherly manner that I died a thousand deaths mentally, every day. It was nothing short of a miracle that both my son and I survived unscathed! Thanks to all those good souls who pulled me out of it.

Regardless of all these, my son kept growing and I, his mother, along with him. I have come to realise that in my struggle to fit that free-size mother robe, I have done the most serious damage to myself.

Now I know that no two mothers are alike. Every journey is unique with its own trajectory and complex contours. I have learnt to become a mother my way and that doesn't make me any less of a mother. Here's a shout out to all mothers in all shapes and forms—if you don't fit that free-size robe, ditch it! You can always make one for yourself. And DO dare disturb the universe with your unlikely mother stories. They need to be heard.

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