

THOUGHTS ON THE CHILDHOOD HOME

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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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MUSINGS

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.

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.

PERSPECTIVE

Much 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.

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 UNMOTHERLY MOTHER

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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 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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