

Name Me Not

FAYEZA HASANAT

*** I ***

It was a crisp midday. The scorching sun sat right in the middle of the sky, watching over the homebound school children. Most of these children preferred walking, nay running. In the morning, they waited for their friends by the bridge over the lake and ran together to the school. Then at midday, they ran back home, holding their backpacks closely to their chests, racing with each other, or with the rickshaws that tried to pass them by. On that day, while chasing each other through the road like a bunch of happy creatures, Kheya and her companions confronted an exciting group of people, shouting at someone in an ecstatic voice: 'PAGLEE, PAGLEE, PAGLEEEE!'

Kheya and her friends peeped through the tightly knitted crowd and saw the target subject: a shabby, skeletal woman—visibly irritated—standing at the center, holding a bitten-old burlap sack tightly under her right arm. She was stark naked. Kheya inadvertently dropped her backpack and ran home. She grabbed a sari from her mother's room and went back to the place where the naked woman stood like a brittle sculpture, while the crowd around her kept jeering, screaming, and laughing for no reason. Kheya dashed through the mob and put the sari over the woman's body. She then picked up her backpack from the ground and walked toward home. The woman wrapped the sari around her waist. She threw cursing words at the nonchalant faces of the diminishing crowd as she picked up her burlap sack and started walking—like a diagonal shadow—behind Kheya.

"Why are you following me?" Kheya asked.

"Take your sari back. I hate wearing clothes." She said.

"Why?"

"Clothes are nuisance; when it rains, clothes get soaked and I have to take them off anyway to dry them. Then when it's too hot, I get soaked in sweat and have to take them off to dry them in the sun. I can't run

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fast when I'm wearing a sari. What's the point of wearing them?"

"But you need to wear clothes."

"Why?"

Kheya's thirteen years old brain fell short in its effort to explain the importance of clothes, especially for a woman, on whose body God had hidden all His shame. But the woman was adamant. She



did not want the sari. Finally, Kheya made peace with her by promising to give her a full kilo of rice as alms if she kept it. Frustrated, the woman tore the sari in two parts, wrapped one half around her waist, and wore the other half like a headscarf. "This part will be my towel," she murmured, as she wrapped her dreadlocks in it. When Kheya came out with the rice and a plate of food, she found the woman on the porch, sitting bare chest, singing and laughing and talking to herself. She brought an old blouse from her mother's closet and gave it to the woman. "Wear this," she said. "You must eat quickly and go before my mother sees you."

The woman attacked the plate like a starving animal. Kheya's cat wiggled her tail and meowed constantly, pleading for some fishbone. But the woman chewed and swallowed every piece of fishbone and ate every morsel of food and then licked the plate clean with her tongue.

"What's your name?" Kheya asked.

The woman did not answer.

"This is my cat. Her name is Biral. I am Kheya. What's your name?"

"Paglee."

"That's what they named you. But what's your real name? You must have a family somewhere—and kids—maybe. Where are they—why don't they take care of you—where do you live—and—wait, why are you taking the blouse off? Put it on, I say put it on!"

"It's too hot—and—your questions make no sense."

The woman put the blouse in her burlap sack and walked away.

*** II ***

Kheya was the oldest child of the family. But because she was yet to learn the reasons to act like a girl, Kheya was an untamed spirit. Her mother did not know how to quarantine her temperament and blamed her father for failing to play his role. But her father actually knew how to keep Kheya on the leash by giving her rewards for every logical deed. He gave her the right to earn two hours of freedom outside the house in the afternoon and buy an ice cream from the vendor if she finished her homework on time. Theirs was a big house that stood right at the corner of the big lake.