

Of Self-Respects, et al

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She was a fine portrayal of the archetypal village housewife. She toiled hard, day and night, without leisure, without rest, in order to give her two children the best she could. Her husband worked in the city, earning just enough to meet the bare necessities of the family. True, he could not buy her cosmetics, ornaments or saris, but she never complained.

“Why, am I not beautiful? I do not need cosmetics, my complexion is fair enough...and I don’t have to smear my red lips with *lipishtik*”, she would say whenever her husband expressed sorrow for not being able to gift her with those things that almost every woman wants.

She loved her husband and everything related to her married life dearly. But then she missed her parents. She had not visited them for two years now. Two years ago, she had gone to her parents with her husband and children. She had wanted some rest; she had intended to stay in her father’s house for a month at least.

Her father was not a miser but his forehead wrinkled when she declared that she had come to stay for a month with her family. “Ask your husband to give some money for your month-long stay”, her father had said, seeming insolent and curt. She was alarmed. What an insult! How could a father ask his daughter to pay him? Couldn’t her brothers bear the cost of her family’s stay for even a month?

“Listen”, she had whispered to her husband in the middle of the night, “Go and give father a hundred-rupee note tomorrow morning and go back home. Then send a message the day after tomorrow that it is becoming increasingly difficult for you to stay at home without us and that you want us to return.”

“What are you saying?” retaliated her husband; “You wanted to stay over here for a month, didn’t you?” She related the entire incident to him and he did not decline from following her instructions.

That was the last time she had met her parents. Her parents and siblings had sent her numerous requests for a visit, never realising why she had suddenly severed all relations with them. However, for the past few days, she had been unusually sad. Now she felt



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that nothing wrong in what her father had claimed two years ago. With prices increasing regularly in geometric progression, what was so wrong in asking for some money for her stay? She yearned to see her parents, siblings, nieces and nephews. But then something always barred her from going to them without being invited again.

Her husband had fathomed her feelings correctly. “Let’s go and stay with your parents for a few days”, he suggested. “You look so effete, just look at the condition of your health!”

“Aah! Pay attention to yourself first and don’t worry so much- your forehead has become all wrinkled”, she caressed his salt-and-pepper hair, quite willing to abide by what he just stated and happy that he had mentioned it.

Her parents and relatives were genuinely elated to see her after so many days. They took good care of her. An aroma of festivity pervaded the whole atmosphere.

...The sun was mellow and kind...

The morning was bright. The trees greener than usual; the sky was pristine blue, full of mercy, the clouds white and cauliflower like. Her husband wanted to go to the neighbouring launderer to get a few set of clothes cleaned. “I’ll come back in an hour,” he promised.

Hours passed as the sun continued its odyssey up to the mid sky. When he did not return after mid-day, everyone became worried. They decided to wait for some more time, but he did not come back. She went back to her home, having a hunch that he must have gone there. The door was locked. She went to the landlord to enquire about her husband. “That swine had come here in the morning”, fumed the landlord, “He has not paid the rent for three months now!”

...The steel- white sun stood lonely in the sky...

Her head was reeling. She rushed to the city, to the place where her husband worked, as the sky darkened with the setting sun. She learnt that he had been sacked nearly four months ago. No one had any idea where he could have gone.

Dark clouds shrouded the evening sky. The city dazzled in the streetlights. But, all that she saw was perpetual darkness. He had been sacked! He had not shared any of his



mirror, mirror on our world...



worries with her! But, how had he managed to sustain the family for the last three months? He must have exhausted all that he had. Now, he had left his wife and children at the mercy of his in-laws. How was she going to pay the rent, and repay whatever other debts he had left her with? Her ears were burning, she was angry. She felt helpless. She could do nothing but resign herself to her destiny... reconcile herself to her fate. A sea of emotions surged through her mind. She felt pity for her husband, her only love. He had fled today, fled for the unknown, uncharted world. She knew why. He too had self-respect.

The sky darkened further. The clouds started rumbling. It was raining heavily, her heart was screaming. Her vision blurred as tears welled up in her large black eyes. How could she relate all this to her parents, her children? How could she ask her parents to support them for the rest of their lives? How could she bend down now? But, could she earn a living? Who would condescend to give a job to an uneducated village woman in today's world?

She gazed down the lane. The city looked menacing, ready to gobble up everything it could grasp on to. A well-dressed man stood near the dim, sickly yellow streetlamp. He started to approach her, his eyes hungry. She looked at her soaked body. She looked down at her reflection at the puddle below her feet, as the dim city lights glowed. She was beautiful indeed! Earning two meals a day for her children would not be that difficult, she mused...



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