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## The Mother-in-Law

### Abstract

My mother-in-law, a stranger to me had been brought to her son's home. The years between us had been barren years, sterile with the desert of silence. I had tried many times to traverse this desert, in search of that illusory oasis, but it was only the mirage that led me on and on. I ended up gaunt and starved, parched with craving for that which would never be. Here, finally I had stopped, with the barriers of dunes before me and the sand prickling against my skin. Those conduits, those springs, those lost oceans were dried up. We were strangers to each other. Yet we were both women to whom this man, her son, my husband, belonged. She, my mother-in-law, who was once a matriarch, who was proud in a sense of her hierarchy, with the pride of possession, a caste, a name, six children was now gradually losing everything. A tree that was being denuded of fruit, leaf, flower. I was the daughter-in-law who had desired more than anything else to know who they were, this family, whose lineage made them a people apart in their village.

JEAN ARASANAYAGAM

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My mother-in-law, a stranger to me had been brought to her son's home. The years between us had been barren years, sterile with the desert of silence. I had tried many times to traverse this desert, in search of that illusory oasis, but it was only the mirage that led me on and on. I ended up gaunt and starved, parched with craving for that which would never be. Here, finally I had stopped, with the barriers of dunes before me and the sand prickling against my skin. Those conduits, those springs, those lost oceans were dried up. We were strangers to each other. Yet we were both women to whom this man, her son, my husband, belonged. She, my mother-in-law, who was once a matriarch, who was proud in a sense of her hierarchy, with the pride of possession, a caste, a name, six children was now gradually losing everything. A tree that was being denuded of fruit, leaf, flower. I was the daughter-in-law who had desired more than anything else to know who they were, this family, whose lineage made them a people apart in their village. In their village in the North they possessed all the prerogatives of caste, the Vellala caste, both at the temple festivals and in their daily life. This family of Saravanamuttu of Mailvaganam of Supramaniam. My father-in-law Saravanamuttu had always worn the sacrificial tetpai grass when he partook of the temple rituals. The temple was built on their property and my husband as a child had often felt their permeation, emanations from those holy sanctums within the groves of palmyrah. My mother-in-law had lived as a child in Colombo for many years. My father-in-law and she had been cousins: he had left the village to come to the city to do business. He lived his early days in a chummary with other young men from the North, the austere life style which he followed from the beginning, persisting to the end of his days. My mother-in-law had married him when she was sixteen years old. She too had left the village when she was very young and had been brought to live in Colombo with her guardian, an uncle, gradually being uprooted from the village. Whenever she went back, she returned to the old way of life, to the ease and comfort of being waited upon and served by the traditional caste groups; the compound being swept of every leaf by Sinammah, the water fetched from the well and stored in large earthenware pots, or drawn by Sinnian for baths. The women came to help in the kitchen, to pound the rice, to boil the paddy from the fields, to pick up the hundreds of mangoes that fell from the laden trees, to spread the pinatu

to dry on the woven mats... a hundred thousand tasks which were performed for this family. In the city it was different; they had servants whom they paid with money who did not serve them through the hierarchy of caste – they had Kochchi cooks, men from Kerala, gardeners, chauffeurs of their cars, ayahs from the Southern villages to look after the children. My mother-in-law led a life that was cosseted and pampered because she belonged to a family that had wealth, property, land, houses, money. Right from the start she was made to feel that others were lesser beings if they did not belong to the same caste and lineage that she did. I was one of those lesser beings. I did not belong. I had made an opening in the wall to enter into her territory. What was this territory? A dichotomy existed within it. In the village it was the vast house with its pillars, its carved doors, its inner courtyard, the tinnai, its palmyrah grove and paddy fields and its temple. In the city it was the house that my father-in-law had built on land that had been purchased for a price, the deeds going back to Colonial times in the Dutch period. These were not hereditary lands but land bought with money earned by my mother-in-law's ancestors.

Still, part of her life had been entrenched in this house, in this village in the North for she went back to where the earth, the soil, the water were familiar, were part of her. And here, in this house, the family guru Yogaswamy would visit them and she would wash out the home with turmeric, spread a kambalam for him to sit on, prepare vegetarian food for him in the shining utensils and listen to his discourse. How then, could I, a different being altogether, be accepted. There was room for extreme cruelty on the part of the one who wielded power. Her world was not my world. Her mythology was not my mythology. Our language was different. I was too young and naive to stop at those closed gates.

I wanted to go inside and feel myself part of my husband's life. It was never to be. The silence grew between us. But I saw what they, that family, refused to see, the breaches made in that hierarchical wall where invaders and intruders, other than myself, insinuated themselves and began to enter as an enemy would.

Their subtle conquest laid that empire low and she, my mother-in-law, laid down the last symbol of her matriarchy with the removal of the thali from round her neck; gradually her jewel boxes were rifled, the knots in her bundles of brilliants, diamonds and gold sovereigns were undone and vanished. Where? Who knows? Those who were themselves of her own flesh and blood, her kith and kin, laid hands on the booty. And finally after Pata's death, my father-in-law's death, the erosion had begun with a vengeance and she began to find that loss of power eating into her very being, leading to her derangement, her delusion and displacement, far away from the village where she had gone for each new birth. Even her city home was no longer her own. It had to be relinquished to her younger daughter. Her nature had gained strength from the sacred

hierarchy, from the hundred thousand poojas she had made. She was confident that by handing over the apportioned out property to those who obeyed her traditions the gods would bestow blessing on her forever.

The courtyard in the Navalay house with its pomegranate tree which always bore fruit, now spread only thorny branches, and there was no more grain left to dry on the spread mats. Who would carry on the temple rituals? Who would care to come and serve her with respect for her lineage? Her nature grew as bitter and corroded as the stagnant water in the well in the grove. Her strength had to assert itself against the usurpation and loss of power. It was this assertion that split her mind in fragments and made her spew out curses and pronounce blessings. She was blind, so blind that she could not see who had stolen her power and emptied her coffers. She still clung to an identity that she fought with every weapon to preserve, but how could she, in this house, the house of that outsider whom she had never fed, never given drink to, whose life had been less than dust to her, my life, mine, her daughter-in-law's?

She stepped into my home, brought by her grandson and his wife. She had just one suitcase with all she possessed. No longer did she have bracelets and rugs and chains of gold. Sold. Given away. Stolen. Right from the beginning the note of discord sounded.

'Do you like to live in Kandy?' I asked her politely.

'What difference does it make,' she snapped, 'Colombo, Kandy, Jaffna, what difference. It is all the same.'

'Don't talk to her,' my husband whispered, 'she will only be rude to you. Akka has told us not to talk to her. To leave her alone. There has been enough trouble in the house of my sister and brother-in-law. They cannot live with her. She interferes in their lives. She does not know how not to step into another's territory.'

How could she? Her privilege was that others should not step or impinge on her territory.

I could not help looking back on the past. The day she came on that formal visit to see her grandchildren.

'I have come to see whether my son is happy,' she had said defiantly at me. My mother too had come to see me. My mother and she, my mother-in-law. My mother with her soft amber eyes resting on me, her daughter, with so much love. Who had sung to me, kept me close to her, spelled out her fictions to me, both of us caught up in that magic mythology that no one could destroy. She had not wanted me to marry into this unknown family, into a culture which was not prepared to admit any intrusion and yet once I had married she had accepted my husband and welcomed him by offering him all the largesse of a generous, open-hearted spirit. Although she did not know it, my mother-in-law had already lost her son. She could not distinguish between what lay within her coffers and the wealth that she had in that life of his. To her the brilliants glittered with

a more piercing and more scintillating light than the love which could have illuminated her present dark.

She had come prepared to be rejected as one who had shown no love, who could not expect love. Yet even her traditional, chosen daughters-in-law disliked her. Her own daughter could not live with her. 'They will chase you away in six weeks' was what one family friend had said; what her own son-in-law had said. They had taken no pains to bring us two strangers together either. So she stood her ground and lashed out, flailed at me with her own bitter words.

'I am a beggar. Begging bowl.' Begging bowl! 'A beggar. A pauper.'

'Whose fault is it?' I ask.

'I don't know,' she shrugs. 'It is the son's duty to look after the mother. For many years my son-in-law Supramaniam looked after me. For big operation he sent me to India. Now they say it is the Mahen's turn, my son, Rasa.'

'But for twenty years Rasa did not exist for you, you had forgotten your son, you never turned and looked at him after his marriage. Because he had not married according to your wishes. You visited us only once in those twenty years.'

For Achchi, her son-in-law Supramaniam, the man of wealth and property, who had married her elder daughter Lakshmi, was the man she had admired and looked up to. This was the man whom she and Pata had chosen with the advice of their guru Yogaswamy. Her daughter would always have the security of a great house, many houses, estates, holiday houses, money to indulge herself, to eat, to drink, to entertain, to travel all round the world. It was one of those traditional marriages ordained by the hierarchies of their kind. But now that Achchi was old, interfering, difficult, even this son-in-law did not want her in his house. I had invited her to come and stay with us but I did not know that her mind was giving way through her displacement, through the violent quarrels which had been hidden from us, with her son Rajan and his wife Mohini.

'You never visited us,' I repeated. 'Never to see your son, never to see your granddaughters, never even when they were ill. We were never invited to your house for festivals or almsgivings. You kept us out. Your children kept us out. Lakshmi with all her wealth never wanted us to come into her mansion. "If you come," she said once, "you must do everything for yourself. I cannot put myself out for you or your family." The wealth had to be conserved for herself and her children. A mansion with many rooms but no room for you any longer Achchi,' I said.

'Pata did not like me to go anywhere.'

'You went only where you wanted to. Places which were important to you. To the temple. On family visits. To the cinema. Not to the house of the outsider. When you came to see your grandchildren you brought your own food, but only for yourself. You sat and ate it alone. Did you think

our cooking vessels were defiled? You did not bring food for us. Just enough for yourself. If anything were to remain that was for us.'

'Begging bowl!'

I felt the weight of the oppressor. Not just that of an individual alone, but that of the whole society which had denied me recognition or acceptance. It was the arrogance of the invader who had grown proud with conquest. From where had Achchi's people come. And Pata's? As long as their wealth and property endured the mythology of birth could be sustained. Ganesh was the god of wisdom. Lakshmi the goddess of wealth. Saraswathi for the Arts. Worshipped by the family. The images and myths, the epics, the legends, the thevaram, the Sivapuram, the Vibukhti that she put on her forehead made Achchi declare, 'I am different to you. I am higher than you. What is your God? I eat only vegetarian food. I pray. I bathe. I put holy ash, Tirunuru, every day. How can I ever do wrong?'

In their grove were the rusted links of the elephant chains that tethered their elephants to the palmyrah trees. Their ancestors had been carried on the elephants to the temple of Nallur to anoint the kings. Was this to bestow virtue on them, this and this alone? My people too had their histories, but we were not going to delve into our individual archives to discover whose history was greater. I felt the weight of this oppression, the being made to feel the outsider. I had gone to that village to discover for myself the mythology of that family. It was a different world. The grove closed in upon me yet I followed the pathway to the house where my husband had spent his childhood. I walked through room after room and found them empty of all but ghosts. No one would return here.

She could not be forced to love me. There was no obligation on her part. But had I not wanted to be accepted by her? Yes. At the beginning I had wanted it. Because I could not think that her pride of lineage should be a barrier. Later I was to know that what had been done was to wound her sense of pride in the inviolability of not wanting to sacrifice, in any way, her sacred hierarchy. The ring of tetpai grass would never unite us because her gods were not mine.

'Perhaps you did not like me because I was not your kind?' I asked.

'Maybe,' she said ambiguously.

I brought the portrait of her parents to her room. She cringed away from it. She did not want to look upon those images. I gazed forever at them, trying to see my mother-in-law in those faces. Her mother in a gold bordered saree, many yards in length. Decked out in gold and jewels. Attiay round the neck and double chains, pahato malee. Mukutti for the nose, of brilliants. Padakkams studded with emeralds, rubies, diamonds. The chains reach to the waist. She appears to be some kind of deity. Fit her into a temple. The goddess of prosperity. Lakshmi. Her body is firm and fully fleshed for she must fulfil her role in life and produce children. Three daughters and one son she had and died before her prime. She

could not breast feed Achchi who was given over to a wet nurse and drank milk from a woman who was not of her own kinship, a Sinhala wet nurse from whom Achchi suckled. Fire consumed that life. Fire was worship too. Walk around the sacred yaham at the marriage ceremony while the Brahmin priests drop seeds which crackle in the hot ghee in the sacred fires of Agni. Mount the flower bedecked Manaverai. Lie in the marriage bed. Bring forth heirs to preserve the traditions. The kum-kumum is bright red on the scar of the parting in the oiled hair. Yet in the pyre the flesh shrivelled the skin cracked in that same sacred fire of Agni. No, Achchi could not bear to look upon that portrait any longer because she had lost all that had given value to that hierarchy. Victim. She now clung to life fiercely trying to preserve, clutching on to it, holding its vessel to her lips to quench her inordinate thirst. And she had to sit beside Pata's bier. He had been her only protection. After his death she could be taken from place to place to live until her own death.

Pata's ashes were strewn in the ocean; they spilt out of the cracked urn and lay like a skin on the water, salt and ash sucked in by fish. Bounty and riches, caste, hierarchy, homage. That was how the family had survived. The koviyars carry the bier in the village to the burial ground but here in the city it is taken away in a hearse. Now the compound is unswept, the leaves pile up on the threshold. The pillars are cracking. The pettagams are like empty coffins. The grove is a wilderness for the birds. The parakeets pillage the fruit and there are strangers who walk in and out of the house. The alari-poo fallen from the branches in a lavish carpet curl up their yellow petals. The toddy pots swing on the palmyrah branches. It is all changed now. The sound of bursting mortar shells reach the village. The militants wear cyanide lockets round their necks. Bridegrooms of death. New invaders march in and out; one supplants the other. Where jewels were once locked away, arms caches are now found. Strangers have taken over everything. The children no longer go to the temple to carry on their rituals. The Brahmin priest carries on the Kodiyettham ceremony on behalf of the family. No one can ever return.