

**UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL**

**WHEN SITA MET BELLE:  
AN INDIAN WOMAN FINDS HER  
VOICE  
THROUGH RE-VISIONING FAIRY  
TALES**

**SOHANI NATASHA CHUNDHUR**

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## Abstract

The dissertation comprises a creative component and a reflection paper. The creative component is a novella titled "When Sita Met Belle." The novella engages with the *Beauty and the Beast* narrative written from an Indian woman's perspective and set in a South African context. It draws upon the experiences of Sita from Tulsidasa's *Sri Ramacharitamanasa* and Belle from Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve's *La Belle et la Bête*, or *Beauty and the Beast*. Belle and Sita are alike in their voiceless qualities and experiences, which reverberate through the female characters in "When Sita Met Belle." Each chapter is based on a different strand of the *Beauty and the Beast* narrative. The epigraphs from the *Sri Ramacharitamanas* create the overarching mood of Sita's experiences in the creative component and connect with the Indian context of the piece.

The reflection paper discusses the re-visioning of the *Beauty and the Beast* fairy tale from a modern feminist point of view incorporating elements from *Sri Ramacharitamanasa*. It explores the re-visioning of a fairy tale from a feminist angle, outlining previous re-visions of the *Beauty and the Beast* fairy tale, the contributions by Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter as writers who have influenced this re-vision, the contextualisation of the *Beauty and the Beast* narrative, the depiction of Sita and Belle in their relative stories, and the Disney treatment of fairy tales. Thereafter there is an explanation of my choices of re-visioning in the novella and a summary of the necessity of re-visioning fairy tales. The reflection paper comments on encouraging female agency lacking in the protagonists of Belle and Sita, and reveals how this is achieved through a re-vision. Of the two genders, only one can truly encapsulate and convey the female experience in a creative and positive expression. As both the fairy tale of *Beauty and the Beast* and the Hindu text of *Sri Ramacharitamanasa* are adaptable to the times, they offer the possibility of a re-vision which makes heroes of heroines.

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## Declaration

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Graduate Programme in English Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.

I, Sohani Natasha Chundhur, declare that:

1. The research reported in this dissertation, except where otherwise indicated, is my original research.
2. This dissertation has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.
3. This dissertation does not contain other persons' data, pictures, graphs or other information, unless specifically acknowledged as being sourced from other persons.
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  - a. Their words have been re-written but the general information attributed to them has been referenced.
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Finally, I must express my profound gratitude to my mother, my sister and my partner for their support and encouragement at different points throughout my years of study and through the process of researching and completing this project. This accomplishment would not have been possible without any of the abovementioned individuals. Thank you.

Sometimes, we get lucky in life ... but most times we have to work very hard for luck to come our way.

Sohani Natasha Chundhur

## When Sita Met Belle

\*

*Once, a king found a baby abandoned in the fields of his land. He placed her upon his favoured horse and took her to his castle. There, his wife fawned over the tiny find, having no children of her own. He sent his messengers to every village in his land but not a single person came forth to claim the child. Though you may think it harsh, it is a common thing, you will find, that parents forget their children, their daughters twice as much as their sons. So, the lost babe sat for over a year, nameless. It was a time of war and, in times of war, little girls were burdens. Even when the wars had ended, the idea had caught hold and cemented itself in the minds of men. The childless king, deep in the middle of his wars, resolved to keep the baby and named her Sita; the child of the furrow, the princess of the earth. You may think this story is a happy tale but not all tales are happy and happy endings are not always as we think they will be.*

*For a time, Sita believed herself happy because she was told that she was. The princess grew into that wish parents have for their daughters – a lovely, young lady. She was meek, submissive, obliging to requests and always followed by her sisters, for the queen was later blessed with many daughters. Yet, as with all daughters, the worry of having them turn into wives was soon upon the king and queen.*

*You will soon understand that love is not the same as worth and the king deemed only a worthy man would wed his daughters and they would be wed in order of their birth. So, the crafty king devised a tournament of the bow, inviting every noble man of royal lineage to break a magical bow and win his eldest daughter, Sita, as a prize. This, of course, was strategy and power play – kingly virtues indeed.*

*Such interesting news spread throughout the land, bringing two brothers named Rama and Lakshmana to the city of Janaka, named after their crafty king, of course. Men were fond of naming things after themselves. Sita, too, bore the name Janaki for the king had no sons on to whom to place this burden.*

*The tournament was simple. Each suitor would have to raise the massive and ornate bow, string it and claim a garland from Sita in victory. Many boasted of their triumph before they were thwarted. Others were mocked for their failures, their names carried in jest. In the crowd*

*was one man, a warrior king named Ravana. He had a great appetite for knowledge and had fought in many battles. For his intellect, he had grown ten heads. For his victories, he had grown twenty arms. He had amassed an army that had laid siege to the heavens and won, vicious fighters who had not yet tasted defeat. His palace was tiled with gold and walled with jewels and he was the only person in possession of an aerial car. He was hailed as a hero amongst his people but he looked like a beast; caped and cursed, living with the lowliest of men. But is not a beast just one with unrestricted power? And can a powerful person not do more good at the bottom than at the top? Can a man not better push his people to success from the bottommost rung of a ladder than from the uppermost one? Despite his beastly reputation, it was only King Ravana who had come for Sita and Sita, alone. However, the young child of the furrow and the princess of the earth had not been given permission to look at any man who was not her husband. So, the bow sacrifice continued for many days without either person seeing the other.*

*You see, the crafty old king had been waiting for the brothers, Rama and Lakshmana. Sons of King Dasratha, the charming young princes were also in search of wives. When King Janaka saw that the sons of the city of Ayodhya had entered the grand arena, he had his servants swap the bow with an exact replica that would break at the slightest tug of its string. One flick from the eldest, Rama, and the bow broke into kindling for a fire. Poor child of the furrow and princess of the earth had her future etched in flames, then, and the beast-like Ravana, the most powerful man there, slunk away without a wife.*

*Celebrations arose from the centre of the crowded arena as Sita garlanded the man who would become her husband. The merriment spread out into the city of Janaka and across to the land of Ayodhya for a young marriage promises many joys. The celebrations fed into Sita's mood and, for a time, she believed herself a girl in love, a woman to be married. She believed herself happy because she had been told that she was.*

*\**

## Chapter One: A Tale Told by the Sun and the Moon

\*

*When Sita saw all her mothers-in-law, the tender girl closed her eyes in dismay. They appeared to her like so many female swans fallen into the hands of some fowler.*

*“What has mischievous Providence done!” she said to herself.*

*They were sorely distressed when they gazed on Sita. “We must bear all that Fate imposes on us,” they thought.*

*(Sri Ramacharitamansa, Ayodhya-Kanda, 245, 1–4, p.570)*

\*

Morning.

Long ago, there lived a girl in a far away land. The land was fed by the rains and coloured with the white buds of the *umthungulu* and its red berries until, one day, the rains stopped falling and the berries started browning. The earth outside of her home started to change. The ground cracked where the cattle walked and the clicking tongues of their watchers were heavy. Dust rose into the air, thickening it. Every day since her birth, she had been promised the world, a prince and fabulous shoes which did not bite into her broad feet or pinch her chubby toes. That girl was a woman, now, and had given up on all but one of those three promises.

My search had brought me far away from my dry, dusty, cattle-trodden home, and more than those three things escaped me on my journey. The morning had been slow enough with flight *Bo Beep* sitting on the tarmac waiting for its lost sheep. It was a minute away from being announced as officially delayed, which would set back the entire schedule for the United Kingdom flights. This was not the freedom that I had envisioned when I left my family’s home and the cattle that had walked the fields with me.

Out of the seven days in the week, none whispered of the life read about in fairy tales. I viewed life through glass windows that did not open and envied the birds that flew beyond



them. I saw stepmothers kiss stepchildren fondly, princes sit on white plastic chairs instead of horses and found shoes that would never be claimed – none of which were my size. The evil witch was the old lady running a spice shop in town, Cinderella’s stepmother ran the wheel alignment centre after her husband had died, Snow White suffered from depression and Sleeping Beauty from narcolepsy. Every day that passed, I became more aware of how we are sold on stories of women living in prisons, meeting their princes, triumphantly grasping their freedoms and waving both in the faces of their captors... but, often, our stories start in reverse. Fairy tales, I concluded, were lives in reverse.

Some people were lucky. They became flavour testers at ice-cream stores or cake factories. Me, however, I got to sit in the most elevated gate of the airport as the African Rapunzel who called wayward travellers to their correct gates and watched on the sidelines as the world whirled around me in a mad dance of minutes. The only music that played in this dance was the humdrum of consistency; the squelching of sweaty rubber soles, the wails of babies awakening in disorientation, the fatigued beep of Melvin’s shuttle as he ferried squat, sleepy-eyed and hunched people between gates, the fat rolling of wheels beneath stuffed suitcases, the groans of parents mingled with the tantrums of their children and a phantom wind that stole through the place even when the glass doors were closed. They were all on the periphery now, lost as the cattle of my home had been in their search for food and water, as I zeroed in on the sole straggler in front of me who had fallen soundly asleep. Economy travellers were the worst.

A whistle caught my ear and I saw Langa, the newest of the ground staff and Melvin’s protégé, walk perpendicularly to the sleeping traveller with his earphones in his ears. He was dancing like the jabberwocky and caught many a raised eyebrow as he passed. The poor soul had aspirations of breaking into the music industry but the world had been cruel enough to crush his hopes along with his femur. He whistled as approached me but I sicced him onto the sleeping passenger with a head nod.

“Hello? Hello? Madam, hello?”

I heard the cool sting of flesh on flesh before I saw it, even though I had been staring at both of them. It was true, then. Sound *did* carry faster than light.

“*Yoh, yoh, yoh*, madam ...” They both stared at each other, Sleeping Beauty holding her hand to her chest and Langa his cheek.

“This is the third *final* call for *your* flight to London Heathrow. All remaining passengers, kindly make your wa— Yes, madam, that means *you* and only *you* at this point,” I announced, gesturing around the empty lounge.

My intervention caused the Macarena of movements as Beauty grabbed her belongings, her frame of mind and sanity. Her hands felt over a jacket that was a size too big for her shoulders, jeans that needed a belt to stay up, and a baggy T-shirt that read “Eat, pray, love doughnuts.” Her dark-rimmed eyes were round with tears as she dropped to her knee to drag her single carry-on suitcase that had lost a wheel.

“Sorry,” she mouthed as she handed me her passport.

“Boarding pass, madam,” I said, flattening my tone against the wellspring of sympathy that I felt for her. I knew the type. I had seen many board flights to lands far away from home, the unknown providing protection against the known. “Is that just one piece of carry-on?”

“Yes, but ...” she started fumbling, checking her pockets and her feet. A heavy, red-stoned ring rolled away from her and she scrabbled to collect it. “It’s my handbag and I am—”

“*Haibo*, you dropped this.” Langa bent and picked up a thick book that had swung free from its red wrapping and fallen to the floor in the fumble.

“*Wait!*”

Langa stood frozen at the barked command, hunched over as he was with his hand gallantly hanging in mid-air as he was about to retrieve the grand book. The last of my passengers rushed over and scooped up the book. She flicked through the first few pages of the book and let out a sigh that would have circled a mountain. The boarding pass that had been sitting between the pages appeared in victory. Whilst I scanned and checked her details, she wrapped her book in the same red cloth, careful not to get her fingers caught in the folds.

“Such care for a book?”

“It is our holy book.” She held it close to her chest with her fingers splayed across the cover. Her nails were neat and unpainted with even fingers, aside from one that angled away from its compatriots.

*It is grander than all the fairy tales ... if you know how to read through stories.*

“Like an Indian Bible?”

She tilted her head and grunted.

*The Bible is also about women who suffer in the shadow of men.*

Langa checked under the seats of the lounge. It was not a part of his duties but he had worked it into his routine and Melvin gave him a wide berth. A veritable treasure trove of keys, watches, earrings, necklaces, bracelets, earphones, headphones, memory sticks, hard disk drives, mobile phones, books, diaries, gloves, scarves, hats and makeup could be collected after every day of departures; old memories lost in the rush of making new ones.

“How do you feel comfortable enough to sleep in an airport?” Scanning the slip of paper was proving fruitless as the barcode had tiny creases along it that fooled the reader. “Sleep is not your friend amongst so many strangers, especially since neither of us has a troop of dwarves to protect us. Did you squash this?”

“Sorry,” she said as Langa returned, scratching his head.

“No need,” I grunted, realising a manual input of the crumpled barcode was the only solution. “The character of a woman is in the way she slaps a man. And you slap like my great grand-aunt; firm and fearless.”

*Oh, thank you ...*

Finally, colour rose to her cheeks. “What was her name?”

I stopped and looked up at the person in front of me. She was short with dark hair and even darker eyes. Sadness had hollowed them and she had a habit of stealing glances at the room around her. Her left eye creased in, as if she had bitten into a rotten apple, and made her appear to be squinting when she spoke. Her shoulders hunched forward in her baggy T-shirt. Her jeans and the jacket had definitely seen a few closets. Yet, she looked straight at me when she spoke and she had asked a question no one else had cared to ask before her. She stood in front of me now, looking at me when the hundreds of people under my care looked right over me to their destination.

“Uvelemva. It means ‘she who appears last.’ And,” I snorted, “it was quite apt. She was the last of her father’s children.”

She shifted in her thin white shoes. Of all her items of clothing, these were the newest. Her shoulders slumped even further in response and the grip on the book became tighter. Bony fingers, used to the water like a swimmer's hand, contrasted mine which bulged around the dozen rings I wore. As I returned her boarding pass to her, the beaded *imitsheke* peeked beyond my cuff and I slapped it away. Her eyes caught the motion and roamed over my jewellery. I returned the favour but she had only a tiny black dot between her eyebrows for adornment.

“Some men are built of bad luck.” Her eyes followed mine my fingers as I typed. “I have seen it since I was eight. Often, we can live right next door to it and not notice but, when we marry it, it is hard to escape – as was so in my grand-aunt's case. The man she had married... *ewish*, his bad luck fell on all the women in his life. He had married half a dozen women before my great grand-aunt entered the picture. Imagine that! How greedy can a man get?”

“Is that important?” Sleeping Beauty asked as my walkie-talkie spluttered to life. Our supervisor, Madam Gothel, was about. Everyone would jump to their duty points or face her wrath.

“*Wathint' abafazi, wathint' imbokodo*. Repeat it whenever you feel what is catching you has caught you.”

“What does it mean?” Sleeping Beauty struggled to get the words on her tongue.

“You strike a woman, you strike a rock.” I watched her taste the words as they settled. “The women, we say, are the strength of our people. You strike a woman, you strike a rock. But, my dear, things bounce off rocks. In Uvelemva's case, those words did not bounce. Instead, they absorbed.”

The cackle of the walkie-talkie started up, again. I scratched my ear, my braids having become too warm for their nest, and wondered how much I could tell this Indian woman before she called me foolish. Indeed, the stories of the ancestors were powerful. It was how we lived, how we learnt.

“An *amagqirha okuvumisa* cornered Uvelemva when she was still a girl playing with grown-up notions like flowers in a daisy-chain; stringing them together to create something magical and meaningful. The *amagqirha okuvumisa* chanted and sang, chanted and sang. She filled

Uvelemva's head with a future she could have with a man she could not see. Romantic, this daisy-chain was. The young girl that she was did not know what that meant but the *amagqirha okuvumisa* chanted and sang, chanted and sang. She filled the air with promise."

*An air of promise but a life suffocated.*

"Did she tell her where to find her husband?" Sleeping Beauty asked.

"Yes, from the mountains that blocked land from ocean. A lean grey leopard, the pride of his stock, resided there and he was to be her husband. We did not know much about the folk there. He came from a place where you could not see the sun, so high were these guards of rock and time." Out of the corner of my eye, I kept watch on Langa and the monitor's screen. "The marriage was in secret. Many girls are lost to us this way. My heart hurts for them but still the *amagqirha okuvumisa* chants and sings, chants and sings. Their heads fill as the air fills. The future is promised, the *amagqirha okuvumisa* says, one must simply fulfil it."

Langa tripped on the edge of a chair but caught himself as the walkie-talkie buzzed to life. He looked around like a dog startled from its sleep. The familiar crackle ... Madam Gothel was about.

"Still, night covered him from her sight that day and every day of their marriage. He worked hard, she attested, returning home only when the curtains met each other. He left in the mornings before the curtains parted ways. Most of Uvelemva's life was in the dark, away from her family, as was tradition ... the way it is."

*Crackle. Crackle.* Madam Gothel was about ...

"So, we – the little girls who knew nothing about marriage – made up stories about this mysterious man. In one of them, he was a monster which breathed flames and ate chunks of Uvelemva at night. The older kids said that he had killed his previous wives and used their blood to water his lands. They would dare their friends to trespass on those lands at night and listen to the cries of the dead wives. I laughed with my friends and listened to their stories but I was afraid of him, of marriage. I could not fathom how a woman would sleep with such a beast or live her life with it, especially not one who would eat her alive at night!"

*Crackle. Crackle. Snap!* Madam Gothel was about ...

“Aside from the gossip, no one paid attention to her plight for what was there to worry about? Monster or not, he provided her family with a hundred times the *uduli*, the dowry, she had brought to him in return. Her siblings got fat and parents wealthy in her absence so her father did not question her absence. But one thing remained ... she could not explain the origins of her husband’s riches. Yet, which woman would question her husband on such matters in those days? As his wife, she did not need to fulfil any domestic duties. Her meals appeared at the table as if by magic morning, noon and night, and the house was tended by invisible hands. Every comfort was met except one – people. The only condition for all her good fortune was for her to have him and no-one else. From a family of twelve to alone, silence and isolation were her only companions. She even took to talking to the statue of herself that he had placed in their home.”

*A statue? Some women are created statues in their homes.*

“See, while the *amagqirha okuvumisa* told Uvelemva that she would marry, she did not promise that she would be happy.”

*And, happy endings are not always what we think they will be.*

“But, more than that, it was the silence that wore her out. Silence is solid; it is strong and it cannot break. In her husband’s home, she had seen neither dog nor cat that would befriend her. No birds sang. Nothing roamed except his cattle, but they remained far from the house. There was nothing to war with the solitude. Yet, the land was lush and fertile. The grass was green and the seeds came to full ripeness like a young woman, like her. The others who visited our village spoke in hushes around our home. Their words were of madness. They spoke of women bound with hair and the elegant tangles of death streaking down their naked backs with dark magic slicing through their skins.”

*The Sitas ...*

“The whispers persisted through the years, like draughts through cracks in old houses that made old ladies draw their shawls about their shoulders and poke at their fires. As the whispers grew into tornadoes of suspicion and slander, we came to suspect that the evil was right outside our doors. Not one of us could believe the others capable of such a thing but none of us were above suspicion. That was when we lost our faith, our community and ourselves.”

“Through it all, that lean grey leopard sat curled up in the darkest corner of his home with the curtains drawn closed. Only his cattle walked upon the sand, aging beasts that would never die. They said that the beasts were strong, that they had birthed calves by the dozens ... calves that wandered into the private cemetery behind his home, never to return. Their cries would resonate above the wind and the rains as they cowered amongst the statues of the lean grey leopard’s late wives on that circular plot of death. Rescue was out of the question. What could survive in the soil spiced by the devil?”

Langa’s shaky breath was the only disturbance in this empty terminal. Sleeping Beauty’s grip on the book tightened. Neither spoke.

“I see it in the faces of the people I scan through my gate; the married women who found wealth in their husbands but not in their lives, the men more interested in *their* lives than the lady living in their homes and the ones who would return home late at night because they were more enamoured of their lives at the office than their actual lives. I have seen them all; the women who had children for the distraction that they would provide from the gaping holes in which they struggled for escape, the look of a man who saw nothing else but his empire’s heir and his legacy in a newborn’s face and those who walked through the world but did not see it. I have met them, seen their passports, their present and their future. But I have not spoken to them as I do to you.”

*Why—*

I brushed off the fast-forming question from her tongue by continuing the story.

“When my great grand-aunt escaped her husband’s home, the family did their best to convince her to return to the lean grey leopard. They thought only of their shame, of their reputation, of their losses. They did not consider what her return would cost her. Instead, they turned away from her. The moment that she had crossed the river that fed our village, everyone knew that she had to be sent back.”

“What did her mother say in all this?” Both of us turned to Langa. He was leaning so far over the chair to listen to us that I expected him to somersault into the story.

“My great grand-aunt had been younger than all her sisters when she married the lean grey leopard. The women worried Uvelemva that, not knowing his face, she was sleeping with different men on different nights. They teased her that she could not tell apart her husband

from other men or monsters. Yet, although she had been young, Uvelemva would have known if an octopus had slunk between the covers at night rather than her husband. Every wife knows how her husband feels, how taut his skin beneath his shirt, how his muscles play when they hold her and how his cheek rubs hers when he seeks comfort. Now, do not underestimate the words of women bent on a purpose. Very soon, Uvelemva had insurmountable doubts. She starved her mind of reason but suckled at the imagination of the women of her village; at her mother's worry before her father's fury."

*You can make your father mad but not your mother sad.*

"To salvage her mother's reputation, Uvelemva returned to her husband's home. It was daylight when her shadow hit the threshold and the lean grey leopard was not there. As usual, she drew all the curtains before her husband returned. Whether he had been relieved to see her return or suspicious, he did not immediately say. Night after night, she lay next to her husband. Night after night, she learnt how to draw him into an exhaustion that detached him from the world. She learnt to read his breaths, to decipher the different levels of sleep under which he fell. One night, she lay next to the satiated beast and heard him pass into a deep sleep. His breath evened out and he flung his hairy arms over his face. She stole out of bed, naked, and cast open the bedroom curtains. The moon screamed into the room and lit up the bed!"

*Werewolf ...*

"*Hai, wena!* Curled around the vacant bean-shaped hollow that she had left on the bed was the handsomest man she had ever let her eyes feast upon. He rolled over and stretched; a single, lean banquet for the eyes. But her enjoyment was short-lived. As soon as the moonlight hit his hip, it turned his skin to scales. The moon, you see, was his curse, from the first woman he had wounded, the village *amagqirha okuvumisa*." Deflated sighs from my audience greeted the pause for the breath that I took.

"Uvelemva, witnessing such magic for the first time, turned to stone right where she stood. Her heart stopped, the women would later say, and she paid for her sin of disobeying her husband." The walkie-talkie sparked to life and we all jumped. The smooth voice of experience notified the ground crew of the next departure. "Her statue was placed amongst the others of the lean grey leopard's wives. It stands where the calves cry. If you ever find the



circular plot of death, you will hear the cries of the calves mingled with those of the unborn babies in the hard cement of those statues.”

“What happened to her husband?” Aye, this girl was a bright one.

“I forget most of this tale from this point. My mother moved to the city as soon as apartheid fell. You would think that a woman without a husband was freedom but try a woman without a *dompas*! She could only find work as a maid, though. I remember her going to work in the mornings in her well-pressed skirt and blouse that was starchy to the touch. Her uniform was folded into the bottom of a plastic bag because no one on the trains should see her in it. When she returned home in the evenings, I could smell the cleaning fluids over the meals she would prepare. When she tucked me into bed, the smell of the bleach and the green soap would make my nose twitch but I always held my sneezes in my pillow. I cannot remember playing a single game with my mother in all those years.”

*Had our days been only that? Between morning exits and bedtime baths, did that time even exist? Did those days for a parent even exist for them, if they were not in it together with their children?*

“I always wondered how my mother filled her days in that space between the morning chaos and the evening clean-ups. If you had asked me what she had been doing, then, I would have said that she was coming home. She was always coming home ... sometimes I feel as if she still is even in my own home.”

“What I know is that the *amagqirha okuvumisa* that found my great grand-aunt still wanders with the cattle that do not die. Her curse is to forever search for the next bride for the beast she had created.” I cast a furtive glance around Gate A7, noticing that the walkie-talkie had quietened.

“There is a certain picture to our lives, some order in the chaos. It’s like those stereograms that hung in the display windows of the mall. I was taught, when I was very young, that a man cannot be without work. A man with work cannot be without wealth. A man with wealth cannot be without a wife. A man with a wife cannot be without heirs. Yet, I have often wondered if the same can the same be said of a woman.” The final call sounded on my walkie-talkie. The ground crew would be exiting the plane soon and closing the doors behind them. “My mother did not believe in a great many things but she believed in Winnie. She saw

that a woman could have all that with and without a man. Let the man be the face, the icon; the woman will be the spine, the strength.”

“Is that what it is like,” she motioned and I realised that I was rubbing my tummy, “knowing that you are to be a mother?”

I snorted. She really was a bright one. Her question recalled memories of my aunts visiting the ‘big city’ with containers of *umqombothi*, and their stories. “Well, for the longest time, you learn to go without make-up, sleep and jewellery. You, also, give up all hope of travelling freely.”

Langa’s face fell. “Motherhood is like apartheid ...”

I almost launched the collected boarding passes at Langa. “On that note, I will let you board that plane, now, Miss Sharma. Have a safe flight.”

“Thank you ... er,” she said, looking at me now instead of behind her.

“It is Nomalanga, dear.” A smile, quick and full, appeared before she pulled it back into herself. “It means the sun.”

“And I am the moon,” called out Langa, tapping his cheek in remembrance as she scurried down the ramp with an undone shoe-lace waving behind her. God knew every girl needed at least one fabulous pair of shoes that would not trip her.

“That is the last time you launch me on a heroic quest to awaken a sleeping beauty. Right, mama?” Langa complained to me as I patted him on the shoulder.

It was back to my tower, back to my prison. It was one built of my own hopes, that errant slice of wind that no mortal could reach. Like my hair, all I had to do was grow. Perhaps, when that lost girl escaped her dark forest, I would escape my tower and my Madam Gothel.

*Crackle. Crackle.*

\*

*Sita could never quite swallow around the fact that she was getting married.*

*Girls dream about their wedding day, she was told. The sari, the celebration, the breyani, dhal and soji were all necessary ingredients for the perfect wedding. Yet, nowhere was it written how she should feel about it all. So, Sita sat with her wedding card in front of her and her wedding sari above her, listening to them both as they whispered of a future for which she had been ill-prepared. It was when she had started to whisper back that she grew afraid. That fear took her – and the wedding card in her hand – into the garden where she knelt before the thulasi tree and buried the vile invitation. Then, like all good girls, she prayed.*

*“Ma ...” Sita stopped abruptly. There was a rustle of leaves behind her. Crouching, she turned to see that her nursemaid had followed her. She smiled, her hands clenching to hide the dirt between her fingers.*

*“Many girls are nervous on their wedding day, their wedding night most of all. Remember only a few things for a successful marriage. A good wife will always wear a sari to cover her face but she will mark her forehead with the brightest sendhur. She will awaken before the roosters to fetch and heat water for her husband’s ablution. She will have his supper ready and taste his food for salt but always let him eat first. If you pick fruit for his supper, pick them when the sun is out. It is when the day is warm that they are sweet. Always cut the mangoes and marigolds when the sun is out. When the sun is gone, they are asleep. Like children, they all sleep, too. Do not disturb them. But, as Prince Rama’s wife and the future queen of Ayodhya, you will suffer no hardship. There will be people aplenty to pick and cook and fetch for you. With Prince Rama to love you, you will never feel alone or abandoned or unseen. Yet, my Lady Sita, beware of the man who says he loves you. That love will feel like a chain he uses, strung around your neck.”*

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Chapter Two: Flames at Night, Ash by Morning

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*“Tell me, dear Hanuman, how does Janaka’s daughter pass her days and sustain her life?”*

*Your name keeps watch night and day, while Her continued thought of You acts as a pair of closed doors. She has her eyes fastened on Her own feet; Her life thus finds no outlet whereby to escape.”*

*(Sri Ramacharitamanasa, Sundara-Kanda, 29–30, 1–4, p.775)*

\*

Afternoon.

“Got lost, Charu?” I teased.

*For years, my friend.*

“Watch where you step ... the birds lose their way here, much like the rest of us.”

The blue-and-berry façade of the apartment building reared up in front of us like a snake shedding its skin. It was a building well past its prime with paint that had started to fleck, dampness that had begun to rise and moss that threatened to swallow the entire thing. If Hansel and Gretel had found this place, they would have run back into the forest and not made the acquaintance of the nosy old witch of a building manager who lived at Number 13, stomping above my little home.

Charu followed me through the unkempt garden of multi-coloured crotons and elephant-ears. She stepped over the breadcrumbs that the pigeons watched from their perches on the cracked roof. She passed the foyer that sighed dust and dreamt of demolition until she slipped down the flight of stairs that led to a converted basement. Home. A stray breeze beat us there. The strays were always about. They whimpered through the day but howled at night.

Soon enough, the sound of twenty years of friendship filled the grey walls of my apartment. Clothes, books and papers occupied more space than was necessary but Charu overlooked the

serviettes on the countertop with their gregarious store logos and the mud-caked boots below. The furniture was sparse and the decorations almost non-existent. These were all signs of life, if not of living.

“I like the new place.”

*It does not smell of men’s cologne.*

“I had meant to tidy up,” I said, throwing my hand around the few remaining unpacked boxes, but two decades of familiarity bought a person a lot of leeway.

My gaze fell on the growing pile next to and under the whirring laptop. It was a second-hand, bought on the cheap and beyond its prime. I had left it on when I rushed out to get her from the station and its battery was dying. An option to upgrade was flashing across the screen but it was a lie. No one could spin straw from gold. Yellow and white pages stuck out from underneath the black laptop in a file labelled *Webb, Stone and Lancing*. I walked over and picked up the crazy file; dog-eared and crinkled at the edges as it was.

“Boxes or not, I still like the place.”

*The freedom of it.*

“It’s not much.” The apartment consisted of a bedroom, a closet in the bathroom and a lounge with a tap. The dining room was a piece of melamine atop a pony wall flanked by two barstools and decorated with a solitary potted plant. A single red rose had bloomed in that pot, despite the winter outside, and was the only spot of colour in the place. “More than enough to clean, though.”

“You can’t clean everything, even if you wear your hands down to the bone.”

*And, if you try, there’s still the blood to clean up.*

Her mumbled reply made me pause. Charu had always been kind; the type of person that would not rock the boat or complain of another person doing so. She was more likely the one to steady the ship before it got rocking. I slid the infernal file away. It had been coal for the devil’s fire and had turned my life to ashes. Yet, a different problem faced me. The ashy facsimile in front of me was an unfamiliar friend. The years had faded her.

“All okay at home?”

“Yeah,” a watery smile, “just tired from all the travelling.”

“Getting lost is a rite of passage, here – if you will excuse the pun. What made you travel all the way to me?” I had seen her itinerary. It was the cheapest option available with long flights and even longer waiting times. If time was money, then those choosing those abominable transit times were the poorest indeed. “Tell me, Charu. What’s the story?”

*I am losing myself.*

“No story, Ash.”

She hid her face as she reached into her bag and pulled out a book covered in red cloth and placed it on the table. From this book, she slipped out a slim envelope with the name *Aishwarya Ganesh* on it. A fat yellow smudge on the side, *hurdee* applied by the thumb to the top left-hand corner of a card, only meant one thing ...

*One. Two. Three. Four ...*

“Both are for you.” She cleared her throat. “Postage alone for this would have equalled a plane ticket, hence, the plane ticket.”

“Thank you.” I felt the blood rushing in my ears. I could not touch the holy book because I was a woman on her period and, so, unclean. However, I slipped the card under my laptop. It was now something for ‘the pile.’

*One. Two. Three. Four.*

I walked around the counter and breathed. Four sets of four, the therapist had said.

Memories. Time. Faces. Feelings.

A step for each. A step to move away from each. A step to move forward from each. A step at a time.

*One. Two. Three. Four.*

*One. Two. Three.*

*One...*

*Two. Three. Four.*

“I spent years at home waiting.” Charu was talking before I returned my attention to her. “Waiting for school to end, waiting for graduation, waiting to start my career, waiting to start a family. I want, I need, something more than waiting.”

*I cannot hold on anymore. I need ... something.*

“No story, eh?” I tapped my nose. “I’m a journalist. Besides, no one travels halfway around the world unless they are running to – or from – something.”

*Irony, party of one, eh?*

“You’re a travel journalist who doesn’t travel,” she reminded me.

“I travel,” I argued.

“To restaurants,” she retorted.

“To write,” I returned.

“Reviews.”

“Of restaurants.” I threw my hands up. “I travel.”

“*Between* restaurants.” Charu had some bite in her, despite the beaten look she was sporting.

“And in the year that you’ve been dating him, has your fiancé taken you to as many restaurants as I’ve reviewed? Tell me about this mysterious Prince Charming who’s ridden in on his white Golf and swept you up into this whirlwind romance. What did he do to get that ring around your finger? Climb a mango tree? Break a coconut? Rescue you from ...” It was the smallest tremble of her bottom lip that broke my stride. “Fine, you got me. I’m a travel journalist who doesn’t travel. Let me live vicariously through you.”

I flicked the switch on the kettle and flattened my palm on top of it. It was second hand second-hand but even used things could be useful. The trick was to care about how they worked, to learn them anew. People were much the same.

“What happened to your ring?” The question was a bullet.

“You’re not the only one who has gotten lost.” My eyes dropped to the kettle as it wheezed to a stop.

*One. Two. Three. Four.*

“It all looks so much smaller now. My life ...” I covered the snort that escaped me with the clinking of the mugs. The cupboard held one teacup, two mugs and three tumblers; two of which had been free with Coca-Cola purchases. The teacup was chipped and already in the cupboard when I moved in.

“There’s only so much I can do before I lose my breath, again. I hoped that coming here would ... I don’t know. I hardly know anything now.”

Charu’s eyes were the thing I remembered most about her. Dark as bitumen but alive, they had radiated against her olive skin in her youth, exuberant and eager; two shards of flint that sparked as you spoke to her, but that had changed. She approached the counter-top with the slightest of limps.

“Take your shoes off,” I offered. “Swollen feet are the worst! Cinderella’s sisters knew this.”

Her shoes came off easily and she wiggled her freshly liberated toes. Sitting next to my *takkies*, her shoes were clean and the laces grime-less. Mud had not caked the heels and the rubber edging had not yet cracked, but my friend was about to do just that.

“We are women. If we don’t speak to each other about what is going on with us then can we actually converse at all?”

A weighty breath escaped my friend. “Tell me yours and I’ll tell you mine.”

I settled the tea bags into the mugs and considered her proposition. Only Pari Shivshankar had the full story of my life. Only Pari I could trust. Yet, something in the way Charu held her chin, the strain in her eyes and the crease across her forehead reminded me why I was in this draught-ridden dungeon at all.

“My father had two wives. Aahna and Darsha were from the first and me from the second. You have met my sisters, Charu, and I am sure you heard the aunties whisper.”

“Yeah, you can never keep anything from the aunties.”

“I grew up thinking that *pitarji* was my father but I was a child born six months after the wedding and seven months after the *jelebis* were eaten at the proposal. Mathematics is a tough bastard. So, I grew up on my own, not knowing why my sisters were kept apart from



me and my father was forever away. Aahna and Darsha were always dressing up in the best outfits and going out while I was stuck in the garden or cleaning up the kitchen. We knew nothing about the trucking business that was in my mother's name in those early days."

I learnt to love the loneliness, to keep busy in the garden and away from the house. "I grew everything from roses to avocados and, miraculously, jackfruit. I grew content as well. Birds often sang between the leaves and bees moved between the petals as I washed the clothes in the trough, hung them up on the lines fashioned from twine and old wooden planks, picked them up and folded them. I did it all again the next day. The worst days were Saturday and Sunday mornings when I had to scrub away vomit from my sisters' clothes. My mother was happy to see me do it and so was I because it set me away from my father's drunken breath. At night, whilst the house slept, I would sneak off to the *shebeen*. The clothes I wore would be picked from the laundry I had washed that day. Darsha was more my size than Aahna but neither of their shoes ever fit me. So, I wore my plain, muddy *takkies* each night.

When I walked into that *shebeen*, it felt as if I had come home. Funny how it was the place that was absent of my parents, my siblings and my history that accepted me. The patrons would smile and greet me, talk and feed me. It's fascinating how full your heart feels to hear a room of people call out your name. Of course, I gave them a false name but that kind of attention was addictive. And, always, when I entered, the *shebeen* owner would play the same song. It thrums in my head on some days. The noise of it rattling my day, the memory of the way my eyeballs would shake from the volume alone is enough to give me a hangover – no alcohol needed! Then, the men would ask me to dance and I would look down at my plain, muddy *takkies*. I didn't know what to do, at first, but they showed me. Each man holds you differently." I had to shake myself out of my reverie, my innocence back then.

"Night after night, I would sneak out. Night after night that song would play. Night after night, I would dance in my plain, muddy *takkies*. Until, one day, Darsha saw that the sequins on her blouse were loosening."

"Sequins were never a good look for you."

"In hindsight, I should have chosen a less betraying blouse." Of all my friends, Charu was going to know my biggest secret. "I stopped sneaking out after that. I stopped going to the *shebeen* and I stopped dancing. When I had almost forgotten that damn song, he came back to

me. And I was in the garden, no less. The jackfruit tree was bearing. It was the first crop and you know the old aunties and their stories.”

“*Hai, Ram,*” we both rolled our eyes. Every Indian child had an Aunty Dolly, Lalli or Chinta who could turn any event into an omen of bad luck.

“The birds were singing between the leaves and the bees moving between the petals but I only had eyes for the jackfruit tree when, behind me, that damn song started playing! I ducked, crouching behind the hedge of roses I had grown, and watched as the *shebeen* owner asked my father for directions. My father, ever the businessman, took him for a walk around the gardens instead to look at the property he was to sell to evade bankruptcy. When he saw my jackfruit tree, he immediately asked for the ripest fruit. All Indian children are taught that the first fruit that is cut takes a life from the family so my father tried persuading him to take all the avocados. He was not about to gamble on whose life would get taken. But then he saw me hiding and lost his cool. The *shebeen* owner, recognising me by my *takkies*, took me away instead.”

“What was his name?”

“Chhaya,” it was still a lump in my throat. “A flame burns brightest in the dark but Chhaya was a shadow I could not brighten. Milk?”

I squeezed the tea bag as I reached into the fridge. Treating a guest was one of the highest levels of respect an Indian girl could show. I had splurged on cranberry juice, brine-filled tins of tuna and a six-pack of uncooked noodles from the foreign shop. It was a one-roomed store stuck between Cannon House and The Royal Park. The lady sold goods that were nearing their expiry date, cheaply, but not milk. The last carton had soured in the fridge and had to be thrown out. Although money was a struggle, it did not look like a challenge. Charu looked to eat about as much I did these days but everyone deserved milk in their tea. Reaching into the drawer, I pulled out the tiny sachet of KLIM that I had been saving for Diwali and mixed it in her cup.

“My father ran my mother’s family’s business into the ground. After he filed for bankruptcy, *pitarji* blamed my mother for everything, including having only girls to carry his name. He was the same as his in-laws; never believing that girls could run a company or manage finances, no matter the amount of degrees we had behind our names. We had the education, the experience and the skills to accomplish so much more than he had, individually and

collectively, and still ...” My eyes fell on the red-clothed book. “The guests, too, had sung Janaka’s praises but not Sita’s when their apartments had been decked out in finery and every desirable treasure. They sang Rama’s praises when he went into the forest with Sita by his side but which prince learnt how to cook in the palace of his father? What could a woman not do when she put her mind to it?”

“Studying, too, would have been such a struggle if not for my mother putting her foot down when they married. She had made him promise in front of family, and family members were the best historians above pen and ink. You would think that such a bind would procure a happy ending. But happy endings are not always what we think they will be.”

One of those draughts whooshed through the old building, flicking my arm as it headed straight into my bedroom. It was alive, that little draught. It moved things around in there, things I had not put away. My mother abhorred things not put away, not ‘put in their place.’ She hated the sound of empty hangers clanging together in the cupboard. I asked her about it, once.”

*Because it is the music of loneliness, of having things yanked away, of walking into a home and having nothing to fill it.*

“My father would get into these rages. Things would get broken; chairs, plates, hearts. They say a strong person is like a rock but that woman was a mountain standing between a raging inferno and her daughters. He didn’t touch us – didn’t get a chance to do so. Instead, he left us; took his clothes but left the hangers behind.” I began straining the tea bags. “Can you picture this tiny woman standing up to this beast of a man with just a curry spoon?”

“Doesn’t seem a fair fight, especially if she whacked you in the eye.” In unison we said, “*Indian chilli powder.*”

Dry chuckles scraped the walls. When they died, we heard the town’s clock chime out the hour in the park. “We healed around him when he left, when he came back and when he left again. Stolen glances, half nods and furtive gestures became our words when the language was violence. Aahna took up running, I continued gardening and Darsha ... Well, two out of the three of us were always out of the house at any given point. One of us had to remain with ma, in case ...”

“What happened to Darsha? Last I heard she was in Tanzania.”

“Darsha tired of many things quickly, including her great ‘neighbourhood newspaper.’ Ma insisted that it must run for the year so I sat with the articles that she had abandoned and started filling columns on gardening tips. It helped me, too, to understand why some bushes never flowered but made great hedges, why the roses died before they took root or the jackfruit took so long to grow. I learnt that stems were made stronger by clipping. When the winds and rains fell the summer following their clipping, they could withstand the assaults.”

Memory stole my focus and I swore as the metal spoon burnt my finger. The tea bag fell back into the mug and splashed on the countertop. In another life, I would have jumped to get the disinfectants and cleaners, to save and polish the surface; to erase the signs of error ... of living. The splatters that danced around the counter now were happy proof of the time that had passed. I rinsed the tea bag and left it on the counter. The rose plant enjoyed a bit of it mixed in with the soil; a little tip from my days at the newspaper.

“With Chhaya, I thought that I had a chance of freedom. A *shebeen* owner was a big deal in the old neighbourhood. I thought that his money and his lifestyle would save us from the smallness that we had become; the arguments, the broken dishes and the neighbours who complained but did nothing at all to help.”

“All this was happening to you ... and you didn’t say a word.”

“It is amazing what a woman can hold in her heart even if that heart is broken and her world has fallen to pieces. I have known enough of grief and its sister, loss, to recognise the pair when they scurry across my path. Here,” I handed her the mug of tea across the breakfast nook and she reached for the handle, her hands shaking as she sought a hold on it, “they do so hand-in-hand like Hansel and Gretel. I am here to talk because I know those siblings. Both make even the strongest walls useless and laugh at the creatures exposed behind them.”

*Women who knew pain saw others in pain. I have known you since high school, my friend, through our university years and a little after the imposition of adulthood. Even over the telephone and with a continent between us, I knew that the friendship we had cultivated on doorstep conversations and midnight ice-cream chatter had cemented us as allies in life. now there was only loss in your voice, of a life not lived, and I had not been immune to it. I let it happen, too. When the calls became less frequent, more one-sided and the letters stopped, the gap yawned between us ... and I did nothing.*

Things had changed and our eyes both fell on the reason for it at the same time. With this wedding invitation between us, Charu made me feel that hole in the fabric of my life even more vividly. Like those old fairy tales, she was the princess who had waited. Now that her prince had entered the picture, she would have a home and a family after that. She would be settled in her own corner of the world; happy and content. I wished that for her. I just did not know if she had wanted that for herself.

“Chhaya was different.” The tea was hot to the touch but Charu did not seem to notice it as she cradled it between her palms. “He did some – a lot – of things to get my family out of debt. He bought a huge sapphire ring whose claws scratched at the skin on my tiny finger as an engagement ring. It was an antique, the type that could buy a villa in the south of France, along with an adjoining vineyard *and* a yacht. Chhaya even paid my father to stop drinking and it worked, for a time. My father pampered my sisters, treated his friends and spoilt the neighbours with all that extra cash. Wealth and indulgence soon erased everyone’s memories. My sisters stopped running and learning things. They became fat and complacent.”

I walked to the single burlap couch, strikingly aware of how different my surroundings had become. From a huge sapphire ring to a single blue sofa, Charu must have noticed the change. Bless her for she gave nothing away, not even about herself, as we sat and drank our tea.

“I didn’t fall in love with him immediately. Actually, I was very cautious around him. He was ten years older, weathered and wild. His hair flicked out behind his ears, no matter how short he had cut it. He was frightening, too, with the largest set of teeth I had ever seen on a man. I hated it when he smiled. There were too just too many teeth in his mouth. Fangs, rather, edged with gold! With the hair and the teeth, he was a veritable animal and very unlike Prince Charming but smart. He could quote from any book in his home – and there were many books! And, at night, the look in his eyes was that of a starved dog looking at a slow-roasting pig on a spit.”

*I have seen that look. It does not thrill me as it once did.*

“There were things that he had said, had wanted us to do, that I did not understand. I believed he spoke another language until I realised that it wasn’t the words but the thoughts, the desires, the wants that were so different. All men want things from women, things for which we aren’t prepared because no one speaks of them to young girls.”

My friend's cheeks were highlighted with humiliation. Each word was a freckle of colour and humiliation was a strong colour. Indian girls were taught to be quiet, to be good, not knowledgeable. We had to get good grades in school; to know English, Afrikaans, Mathematics and Accounting, but not life. We were sheltered princesses under our parents' care in two-bedroom face-brick homes that hid us from the world more than protected us from it.

"Some guys are the sun breaking through the clouds when you're praying for rain. You know?" Not even a chuckle. "You don't really have anyone to speak to, have you?"

"I have him."

"That's not the same," I nudged her and she nodded.

*Whizz. Whizzee. Whizzar!*

"Fireworks, outside in the park." The celebrations had startled Charu but I had become accustomed to them. The world celebrated outside whilst we suffered inside. "If you stand at the kitchen window, you can see just the tops of the really big ones. They look like fireflies escaping."

*The sparkles dissolved into the night. They were gone so quickly, the memories of them fading as soon as they had formed, like so much of life now.*

"Are they still there? Those fireflies around the lake?"

"No, Ash," she swallowed.

*They died out and took all of the magic of the place with them.*

"I'd like to go back, one day. I'd like to remember it as it all was before."

"Won't ever be the same, my friend. Whatever happens..."

*We are the ones who have changed.*

"Perhaps," I agreed but the truth of the word coated my tongue in cement. "Would it have been for the better, though?"

"I used up a ton of calories thinking and replaying things in my head. All my first times, Charu, had been in that *shebeen* and I was never once comfortable with the pace of them, of

him, with the tempo of that damn song ... always in my head. *Stomp. Stomp. Stomp.* That voice that follows every Indian girl circled about my ears, like a mosquito at night. Why even buy the cow when the milk is given freely? But cows need love, Charu, and I was already living with my Prince *Shebeen* Owner by then.” Pursed lips held back regret, second chances and guilt. “The simple fact is that people live fast lives. They feast voraciously on the firsts, take seconds without much thought and lasts without savouring them at all.”

*Once you had your 'first,' it's over and the magic is gone. No one celebrates a second birthday with as much fervour or remembers a second love as strongly and no one loses their virginity twice.*

“It’s not easy, Ash.” Charu spun her engagement ring on her finger until the diamond solitaire bit into her palm. I knew that trick.

“Nothing is easy, nothing worth anything is ever easy and standing up for ourselves in the face of tradition, custom and fairy tales is the most worthwhile thing we could ever do.” Tea without enjoyment was a drink that quickly ran cold. “It’s strange but I never asked him if he was in love with me. I never asked him if he loved me *at all*. Either way, I was too scared to know.”

My finger itched and I scratched it with my thumb. The sapphire had sat there, once, and signalled to the world that I was not alone in it. Silly little stone. Silly me for believing it. “In the end, all we are to them is a contract. What you will learn is that once you sign one, there is no getting out unscathed. Pen indents paper. It leaves marks, tracks, scars... nothing more so than a wedding agreement. This is why Sita sat in the rain, outside and alone. A part of me wishes she had chosen Ravana and the freedoms he offered. Because that is what makes a man a beast, is it not? Having more freedom than is allowed and curtailing the freedoms that *are* allowed? And a woman? She is to sit alone and spin straw into gold until her Prince Charming comes her way. Charm is a beast, too.”

*When a man's charm makes a woman forget herself, then that is when that woman is lost.*

“Legend has it that there is a vein that goes from the left ring finger to the heart. It’s called *vena amoris*. It was what we would have named our daughter – Veena.”

“You were pregnant?” She leaned her body towards me, hip still resting on the melamine top and looked for proof of a child on my face.

“Corrupted ... spoilt ... Yes, twice, in the time I knew him; once before marriage to own me and once, afterward, to own the marriage. He said that I was ‘spoilt.’ Why was I ‘spoilt,’ Charu, and not him? I had been warned so many times about this by my mother, my sisters, my aunts and any random aunty who saw us walking together without the *sendhur*.” I let out a sigh, borne of the years in between that moment and now. “We all lose things in life. No loss is greater than *that* for a woman. *That* loss equates and puts value on a woman’s reputation, wifedom and motherhood.”

*Is there ever really a woman who has gotten over the loss of her virginity, who does not cower at questions of when it was lost or feels empowered to speak of it in a room crowded with elders, family and strangers alike?*

“I had to handle it all on my own – and I didn’t do too well. My Prince had wanted to move forward but I had started to fall apart. Hormones, stress, the medications, my nightmares ... such a vicious swirling cocktail was made with them all blended together with the bitter lemon of lost youth. Was I not a good woman, anymore? Or was I twice a woman, just not a good one? Would a decent man want half a woman? Would a good man want a woman larger in life than him? How was I to reconcile what I had lost in the face of everything that we had been thought?”

“Society makes it impossible for a woman to lose her virginity ‘well,’ if at all.”

I winced, pressing two fingers into the flat centre of my forehead. “In the place of our marriage, he would drink, often more than was good for him. I called him out on it the first time I saw it happening. He grabbed me by the throat and I soon became well acquainted with how fragile I was in the calloused strength of his hand.”

“What?” Her eyes hollowed and I rushed to allay her instant conclusion.

“Chhaya did not touch me after that night. We burnt straight through each other; flames at night, ash by morning. He made it abundantly clear that he had not wanted a wife, just the reputation of having one. It was good business since he was going to expand his horizons from a *shebeen* owner to some sort of hotelier. I believed that he had seen me but it was just some version of me that he had wanted to create. At least, we occupied the same space, although we suffocated in it. It was the silence. It filled the hours in our home, our days apart grew into weeks and graduated into months. The silence became easier to maintain than to cultivate a truce.”



“Ten years older meant he had lived a full decade while I had been sitting in my house hearing my father’s voice through the door demanding *masala chai*. He had said that we had married because *his* father had sat him down and told him that the mark of a man was to commit to *something* – although not someone. I learnt that difference in our marriage because no child wants to disappoint his or her parents. We are like dogs, trained on the leash to obey.”

“Dogs do this strange thing when they’ve been caught in a bear-trap,” Charu started. “They chew off their own leg. Then, they go about life maimed by a choice, their own choice. You’ve got to wonder what happens to them after that because they can’t run as fast, hunt as quickly or escape as easily. Walking, too, presents its own challenges. I don’t think the dog thinks about that. If it did, that would drive it insane.”

We each slurped our tea in a silence rich with thoughts. Friendship forgave the funny sounds that escaped us and respected the words we could not voice, but we heard the phone demanding attention in her bag and the old lady stomping about with her treats upstairs.

“They say that we marry our parents, that we instinctively seek out what is familiar to us – no matter how detrimental – and that we marry it.” Charu searched that little piece of freedom for the last of the fireworks.

“Then we are a stunted bunch,” I snorted. “How did hearing that make you feel?”

“Less.” It was a whisper blown into her tea.

“Then, one day, Chhaya was gone. We had been through a fight a week before. It had been an awful massacre of feelings, a bloodbath of memories. He said that he *had* to marry me because *he* had ‘spoilt’ me. *How* was I spoilt?” I shook my head, hoping to rid the tears that were the erstwhile companion of memory. “When it was happening, I told myself that I wouldn’t think about it until it was all over. Then, I would think less and less as the days progressed. It is a negotiation, like everything else in life and the most difficult ones are the ones you have with yourself. Like that dog in the bear-trap.”

“What if I don’t know how to talk to myself? All I hear in my head are other people.”

“They don’t teach that to us in school, do they? Good behaviour above all else, even your own feelings. That he would be seen as a husband was that was asked. Our smiles were dragged across photographs and family gatherings. It was all a lie. The portrait of our lives

was a lie made of lies. Every smile, every moment of intimacy, *every* day was lies upon lies. We were a smooth lie he had crafted for the outside world to enjoy. On the inside, we were fractured.” She sipped her tea, not tasting it, I knew, for I had drunk my own and realised that I had forgotten the sugar, not that I had any around. “Remember this, Charu, some men are beasts and they feel no shame in lying if it builds them up and makes them look good.”

“Photographs provide fairy tales, too.” Charu sighed into her tea. It was a long sigh, memory grinding it in emotion. She tucked her hair between her ears and there it was. I saw the moment the shutters opened completely. “We take all our photographs seated. He is taller than me, so he has to bend. It looks like he’s hulking over me, swallowing me. He’s tall. He was always a tall person but, at the end, it seemed like he was getting taller and taller. So, we took our photographs sitting ... but even with him out of the picture, he is still swallowing me.”

My friend reached over and cupped her hands over mine. Together we held the mug that had no sugar in it.

“Was I like milk, to be thrown away after I had been opened? Was I that wedding dress that could not be worn because the bride had been widowed? People didn’t see us as we truly were, especially not me.”

“They look through me as if I was the air between them. Sometimes they look above me, to a little sign that says what I am to them – daughter, niece, fiancée – and that is all they know of me. *I am not here, what I am to them is,*” Charu confessed.

“Neither of us had been able to speak to the other after that was broken and the person we were underneath bled through. Both of us knew then that the one thing left to say was the one thing that could not be said.”

“Divorce?” She took a tiny hiccup of a breath.

“Yes, and divorce is always the failure of the wife with us, is it not? Months flowed into years, stretching out our silent lives into shame; a wife that does not speak to her husband and a husband that does not live with his wife was shameful indeed. That silence, words said and not said in heat and anger, grew with time and pride into the obstinate shame that accompanied guilt.” I motioned to her red-clothed book. “They tell us to read *The Ramayana*,

to live like Sita and we will find our Rama. But how do you think Sita felt doing everything right and, still, Ram didn't choose her? He exiled her."

"Between all those fights and the arguments, when Chhaya left, it was without reasons and without calls, not even the respect of a goodbye or the solace of explanation. I couldn't explain it so when people asked about it, I was stumped. I could not even defend myself when everyone thought it was my fault. What did *I* do?"

"When you trust yourself *that* much with another person, any hint – any whisper – of a betrayal of that trust robs you of every other thought, every feeling and every breath. You become a twice dropped vase; so very shattered inside that you don't think that you can hold it together." Charu's bony fingers lifted from the crook of her elbow and pressed against mine. The coolness of them contrasted with the heat from the mug. "It took supreme effort to just get off the bed ... or the couch ... or the floor. I lost hours in the day just thinking about him not being there, of waiting for him to return. I awoke in the morning, did the dishes, swept the carpets, mopped the floors and wore the yellowest items of all my clothes. He preferred that colour on me. I thought of only him because that's what I had been taught. We are told that a daughter puts her parents first, a wife puts her husband first, a mother puts her child first but when does this daughter-wife-mother ever get to put herself first?"

"They say that going through a divorce is like going through death. Finality if not fatality." Charu's head tilted as her phone started to rage in her bag. Goosebumps spread across her forearms before she settled herself with a deep breath. "When someone dies, they come only to exist in the memories of those who had remembered him or her. Our marriage was the same. It exists now only in the memories of those who knew us, remembered us as a couple. But, year by year, those memories will fade, fall away at the roadside of forget and get carried away by the wheels of time. Some distant time in the future, some faceless connection will find one of those wedding photographs in which his father is the only one smiling and toss it away like wrapping paper after the gift has been opened. Truth told and devil shamed, I felt the same way."

"The fireworks are done now." She disentangled our fingers and resettled herself on the couch but her eyes continually flicked to the bag like a mouse watching a cat.

"Oh, honey ... what have you gotten yourself into?" I settled next to her and patted her knee as my mother had done to mine when I told her that I was pregnant. It seemed to push her

voice out to the surface but when she spoke it was a faraway sound, the sound of an echo when it reaches the back of the tunnel; hollow and lost.

“When we were children, we used to make those daisy chains by plucking flowers and stringing them together to fit. Then we would squash them together and prop them up so that they would face forward on our heads, perfect crowns for perfect fairy princesses. To us, they were magic. Pink flowers would make us powerful, white would make us wise, purple would make us proud ... I always felt like a flower on that chain; made to fit, made to sit, made to look pretty. There was no magic there ... not for little girls who grow up.”

“I saw a photograph of my mother on her wedding day. She had been a daisy, too. For all her strength, even on her best day, my mother had refused to divorce my father. It was not the way she had been raised, no matter the avalanche of arguments through the years.” Flowers plucked from their stems had no place to go. “Pari, my part-time counsellor and full-time fairy godmother told me that the only thing worse than drifting was drowning. She took me out on small trips. Days out and nights away, here and there, were lifesavers. Then, when I was strong enough, I left everything in that old house and came here. Pari has family here. She helped me to move in the bed, borrow some furniture and the like.”

*And that?*

Her eyes followed mine so I drew them to the laptop and file. “You may mock at my blog – because, truly, that is what it is – but, as meagre as it is, it is *all* mine. That file is a promise to myself of all the things I have yet to accomplish. I go through them *every* day – stories, ideas, hopes – to remind myself that I am still here, that I exist even as a ‘bad woman,’ corrupt and spoilt. They’re all gone, now. They’ve disowned me and walked away. There were so many days when I felt like one of those loose papers, so easily lost to the world. Upon me was written the outside world; their wants, their views, *their* perfect ideas of marriage. We aren’t even born with blank pages, Charu.”

*The world has written their stories on us before we even have ones of our own. Sita knew this.*

“Do you miss any of it, though? Any part of home?”

“Home ...”

I tasted the word anew. I looked to a desk placed between two large matching cupboards that were crammed together on the opposite wall. It was vastly different from the home I had left behind yet, in the dull light of the English afternoon that squeezed exhaustedly through the hurricane blinds, I saw the room for what it was. Sanctuary. Charu had been right.

“I do not remember where I felt at home anymore. Was it my mother’s home in which I had been born? Was it the *shebeen* in which I had come alive? Or the castle he had built in which I had become a smiling prisoner? I remember hearing all of the laughter of the people I knew from inside that old face-brick house, the faraway freedom of the sun in the sky as I left the *shebeen* and the ting-tang of the rain as it fell. I had never minded the rains before but the rains soak you here; they leave you feeling cold from the inside. I remember that it is bad for the roses, the avocados and the jackfruit. I miss watching the roses entwine and tumble. I miss their scent and how freely beautiful they grow and bloom. I miss the birdsong through the leaves. I miss the bees moving between the roses. I remember the song. I remember my name rising above so many heads. That was my home. That is what I miss.”

“Has he ever contacted you?”

“Once.”

“And?” She practically shouted at me.

“A girl, ten years younger than me, was pregnant with his child. A *child* pregnant with a child!” Her jaw fell. As she scooped it off the floor, I continued. “He said that *I* could not be mad at him. That he was happy now.”

“What about *you*?” True friends were always the ones indignant and outraged on your behalf.

“The ‘happily ever after’ is very rarely happy forever after. As you pointed out, this apartment *is* my freedom. This apartment is where I leave my shoes inside and the world outside. This apartment is where I have a red rose on my table instead of *sendhur* on my forehead.

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*Long ago, in the depths of war, King Ravana's army was desperate for a victory against the brothers, Rama and Lakshmana, rebels who had entered the land of Lanka and started skirmishes amongst the villages. Whilst the brothers raised armies against the king, Sita sat and waited. It seemed her entire life was made in waiting. The years would paint a gladder picture for those who read her tale but that paintbrush was cruel and bristled with lies. So, the princess of the earth and the child of the furrows hid her heart within herself. She spoke only to the thulsi tree that grew beside her on the hard earth upon which she sat.*

*"Thulsi-ma," she wailed, calling the plant the mother she never had. "It was not the blink of an eye, being a bride. The great poets will pen my tale into greatness but all it has become is a great mess. Do not ask me to remember it for I was sand under water, buried but living. I felt every second clawing, fighting for air. I thought that I could make it out, to see the sun again. I could not. Strength was my weakness and the will to survive was my torturer."*

*Sita threw her palms on the ground beneath the bottommost leaves of the tree and thumped the ground. Her tears were claimed by the tree before they could dry. They say that it is good luck to water a thulsi tree but Sita had known little, if any, luck in her life before.*

*"Rama had to leave the city of his birth, my third home, and I along with him. He tried to dissuade me by threatening the seasons against me and the hardness of the ground as my comfort but he had so quickly forgotten that which I was. I had been found in the furrows, blanketed by the earth. He had called me beautiful and he had called me timid. He had called his reputation in doubt if he had to take me into the forest with him but it was a worse fate for my reputation without him. All women know that comfort and luxury are loathsome if a lady's reputation was tattered. It was better for a lady to be with a man she hated who called her wife than a wife be without the man she called husband."*

*Still she wailed and still that thulsi tree consumed all of her tears.*

*"Not even the largest diamond could reflect away the tarnish of a wife without her husband. Love did not bloom in the season of reputation. An indication of a good wife was the length of life of her husband. Mine would die in the forest without my knowledge and I would be a*

*burden – an outcast – to the very family in which I had married. Yes, the furrows would be more welcoming, then, and the earth’s blanket more comforting.”*

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### Chapter Three: The Rage of Hope

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*A woman is impure by her very birth; but she attains a happy state (hereafter) by serving her lord ... Listen, Sita: women will maintain their vow of fidelity to their husband by invoking your very name, Sri Rama being dear to you as your own life. It is for the good of the world that I have spoken to you on the subject.*

*(Sri Ramacharitamansa, Aranya-kanda, 1–10, 5 A–B, p.655)*

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Night.

*You don't have a choice in this, Charu.*

Parting words were the slow-acting poison of a red-back spider. The spidery legs of unease had skittered up my spine the moment his name had flashed across the screen of my phone. It had been him, only him, all through London, who had chased me like The Ripper. Each word sunk like barbs into my soul, dead-cold and poisonous; that spider spitting memory after memory, emotions gathering guilt in gossamer nets spun around me. It was the call of the spider to the fly.

*Things have changed ... but I haven't.*

The uneven white parking line sped towards me as my hands shot forward, trying to hold the line in its place. I saw the areas where amateur hands had sought to mend the previous cracks as my face rushed towards it. These hands of mine could save nothing. The fingers were long but without purpose. At least three had been broken; two of them, twice. They could neither play the piano nor fix a flat tyre, not that I had any aspirations of either. And they were getting wet now. A fuzzy vein of memory laughed at the familiarity of it before it choked on itself. It hurt to remember the pain.

Cool hands were on my shoulders, wrenching me away from the evil asphalt. I was twisted around and instinct rolled me into a foetus-shaped ball before I started to beg, waiting for those hard-tipped boots to kick at me. The stomach – he had always aimed for the stomach.



The stomach was where the foetus formed, where family began. If not the feet, then, he would use his hands. Or, most often, first the feet followed by his hands. They had always been rough, those hands. They had taken great pride in purpling up my face as soon as he had kicked enough out of me to weaken the foetus-ball. I prayed I would go limp right away – it hurt less that way – but I never did. I was stubborn that way. It was a common complaint.

He stood over me and the romance of the streetlight above him was blocked out. This was how the rabbit felt when the snake had turned its head towards it. Some wild thought struck me and turned me cold inside. That my fiancé – my husband in a matter of days – was mad was undeniable but he was neither angry nor drunk enough to have put *that* amount of power behind a punch like that. That came from a place of pure hate. Had I not ever realised that earlier?

I rolled over after he had left but the thought stayed with me. Realisation was the enemy of ignorance. I could die here and be mourned as a girl who died before her wedding day or leave and be spat at as a spinster for the rest of my life. Only a red light disturbed the progression of my thoughts. It called to me as if I stood on my own West Egg lawn.

My head swam and the ground beneath my feet shifted. For a moment, I was back home and twelve years younger with my toes scrunching between the polished grains of sand as my cousins waited for me to catch up. I remember the stiffness that had grabbed each toe, frozen from the cold waves I could not outrun. I had feared them, the icy spray of foam and salt, certain that they would steal the earth from under me and that I would sink through whatever lay beneath the burrowing ants and be lost. Just when I felt the sand give way and the fear consume me, my mother would scoop me up and swing me away from danger, her laughter bouncing over the rocks and across the water as she jostled me into position for I was a heavy child fed *dhalpuri* and *kheer*. I was safe when she laughed away my fears, standing on her feet from where the water and the sand would not dare to snatch at me.

“The waves have seen an eternity, Charu,” my mother would tickle my chest because that is how mothers made everything better. “If you were to be washed away, you would see all the magical treasures they keep in their watery vaults. That’s why sharks are so big ... vaults need security guards.”

“Will they come for me?” I would squeak.

“Yes!” She would swing me around again. “You are the biggest treasure there is.”

A woman's shouts tore through the memory, tattering it with holes of the unfamiliar. An emaciated mongrel sniffed at my feet, blending in so well with the broken asphalt that I had barely noticed it sneak up on me. I raised my hand in front of it. It stopped and dropped something at my feet.

"Honey, are you okay?"

An older woman came rushing up to me out of nowhere. She was grey at the corners of her ears and that was all I remembered. The streetlight lit up the dust in the air around her like a million dancing fairies or – better – fireflies. It was something in her voice that pulled me together. Concern, maybe. But, more so, it was a quiet, simmering rage of hope.

"Y-yes ..." I stuttered. "I tripped."

"Of course, sweetheart ... A man always trips us up." To the dog, she said, "Here, Diana. Good girl!"

I blinked, trying to focus through the blood that ran down my forehead. Asphalt was cruel.

"Thank you."

"Get yourself some help, sweetheart," she said, harsh as the asphalt. "And you might need this."

She lent me a hand to stand. I swayed on the spot, negotiating with gravity. When she let go of my hand, something hard and cold and red sat in the centre of my palm. A ring.

"This isn't mine," I tried to tell the lady but the silver of the filigree patterns sparked with the flames of the fire and the red stone glowed like the eye of a fearsome creature stealing my words.

"It is now, sweetheart. The *tisek* always finds out when it is needed. Isn't that right, Diana? Besides, a woman is best served by a gem and a hound than a diamond and a man, won't you say?" Her tone of voice left no place for argument. "We all deserve our happy endings, love, but, sometimes, we have to find what makes us happy first."

Then, she was gone but I still had that ring. I had forgotten about it in the rush to leave, to run, to escape for even a day to London.

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*I sat in a garden surrounded by dirt and demons and still that was a better fate than a life with my husband. None of those demons abandoned me. Instead, they became my protectors and confidants. My husband was a different story. I was a pawn in his war, the carrot dangled in front of his enemy. When you tell this tale to your children, remember to paint us with different brushes should history make us bow our heads to its murals of greed and grandeur. The great poets will speak of a blanket of lamentation that covered the earth, of monkeys and birds that fell to weeping and evil that rose up into the drought of happiness. But, listen, there is an agony far greater than that wrought in the wars of men. It is the pain in a woman's heart, a silence brought upon her, which she cannot voice or break. It is the moment of accusation, of reputation besieged without valour or validation, which cannot be rebuked in defence. Yes, women are as birds in cages, locked away and cannot fly.*

*Ravana offered me an impossible choice; a life filled with riches and majesty beyond my wildest imaginings for my reputation. An Indian girl knows that a good reputation is the promise of a good life, a bad reputation is death. So, I bade Ravana to slice through my neck as he had threatened. What good was a neck when the head that it carried wore a crown without repute? Death was my only escape but even the fire did not want me. So, I sat in a garden that was not my own, a queen without food and a single matted plait down my back ... a woman separated from her husband.*

*History will call Ravana a monster but they must remember that asoka trees grow only where there is purity of heart ... and he had an entire garden of them. Ram could grow nothing. It was my husband's envoy who burnt down the vatika, who left me with a ring and nothing else.*

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*“To me who was being drowned in the ocean of desolation, dear Hanuman, you have come as a veritable bark. Now tell me, I adjure you, the welfare of all-blissful Sri-Rama ... Wherefore has the tender-hearted Chief of the Raghus ever remembered me – He who is by natural disposition a source of delight to His servants? Will my eyes, dear Hanuman, be ever gladdened by the sight of His swarthy and delicate limbs?”*

*Words failed Her and Her eyes swam with tears. “Ah, my lord! You have entirely forgotten me.”*

*(Sri Ramacharitamanasa, Sundara-kanda, 13, 1–5, p.760–761)*

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Morning.

“Easy, child,” I soothed as the young girl to my left jumped. The devil’s juice I had been savouring ran down my elbow and pooled in my lap. Yet a better sin than a glass of Coke I could not imagine.

“Sorry, I ...” She struck at the sleep in her eyes, as the announcement for upcoming turbulence rang out. Horror swept across her round face as she looked first at my hand on her wrist and then the splashes of Coke. “Oh, I am so stupid!”

“A nightmare is no reason for names,” I chided but my words went unheeded.

Ducking her head, the child swam beneath the seats. From her handbag, she fished out a pack of wet wipes. Her phone slipped out with it and the reason she had awoken in such a fright was apparent. I had seen it in so many of my cases that I hardly think that there is a woman out there who lives unafraid.

The child swabbed and swabbed at my dress. She muttered and muttered to herself as she worked. She had more voices in her head than I had in mine. Young hands but an aged soul, both unable to remove Coke from peach silk.

“Be still, child,” I assured her when she huffed out her dismay. Tears were a word away with her. “There is much we cannot accomplish in life. Like the waves that do not move the rocks, Coke stains will get the better of us at every turn.”

“Strong like a rock,” she muttered under her breath. “*Wathint’ abafazi, wathint’ imbokodo.*”

The sun spoke to me. The words falling in on the morning that shone through the elf-sized window on my right, rays that shone straight through my travelling companion. My grandmother had gifted me her ‘third eye.’ I saw and saw through life as it existed; something that made sense in time and space but not in moments. Existence was a thing of little sense, though. It was a stereogram; only if you knew how to view the pattern did the logic of it all appear to you. My grandmother’s gift was like a bending of the passage of light, focusing it in the dark space of the eye which the brain does not read as sight but which is the most powerful sight of all. She saw the things we could not see for our brains knew not how to handle this ‘knowledge.’

“Sorry, it is the best I can do ...”

Lips pressed and pressed together, she removed the soaked tissues, retrieved her phone and shoved both in her bag. Only one of those things made her grimace, and it was not the soggy, Coke-drenched rags. She checked and checked her sleeves that fell at her wrists and massaged some feeling into her fingers.

“Our thoughts can bruise us, child. Memories, too.” Her head whipped to me. “The fight with ourselves, our minds and our hearts, does more damage than we ever can admit. They lay siege to our nightmares and hold captive our hopes.”

From a tiny zipped compartment of the faux leather bag, she produced two pink pills and drank them with what remained of my Coke. The sun caught the obstinate red glow of her *tisek*. It was such a precious gift to have someone out there caring for her wellbeing, someone who recognised her struggle, a fairy godmother one might say.

“My mamma would tell me that all my nightmares were stitches of fear sewn together into a giant blanket. Any time that I had wanted to awake, all I had to do was throw off that blanket and open a window. Nightmares, you see, wither with the reach of the sun.”

The knowledge she could not share filled and filled her dark eyes when she looked at me. Fate had conspired to place her in my path and, so, had something to teach me as well.

“That is a good ring. You should wear it *every* day and forego the pills. What I know is that peace will not come that way.” I cleared my throat as her eyes widened. “Now, let me introduce myself. I am Miri. I am a social worker.”

“Sita.”

“Really? We are born into our names but, often, the names we find for ourselves are a greater responsibility. Names are trifling things. What we are inside may never be named.” I patted her knee and my bracelets jangled and jangled. They were polished shells interspersed with the bones of our elders, not that the customs officials needed to know about that. “Why grind out the life in you with pills that do not serve your goals?”

I saw her look for a rescue, some form of distraction, but most people remained on the plane as they were in life. They did not interact but were influenced by those around them, even in the silence.

“Who are you running from?”

“I ... am not running.”

“You were running in that dream you just had. You were still running when you awoke.”

“Not a dream,” she mumbled as she polished the *tisek* with her thumb. The magic in it thrummed through the air in the confined cabin. “A memory.”

“I have seen the face of women who run. I have seen the faces of the men who give chase. I have seen the silent ones, the ones muted by the earth and its doings. My sister was one such although she was not born that way. My mother told me that a boy had taken her voice but that was not it at all. That boy took from my sister, yes, but it was not her voice that he claimed. She had been beaten so soundly by my parents when they found her out that she cried and cried until her voice went away. She had a beautiful singing voice, Charu. Sometimes she sang but no one knew that except for me and her beau. When her voice left her, her tears were enough of a song that I or any woman could understand.”

Small, tiny breaths were all that governed us. We were a collection of small, tiny breaths.

“No one looks at our insides. They have not been taught to do so. Even women have not been trained to see themselves. We are reflections of the world seen on water; our wants unvalued. Those who sit beside us at the river’s edge do not see what lies beneath that reflection, that

glass, that unmoving demon. But there is energy there, more vibrant and unique and complicated than a peacock in a mating dance.”

“Peacocks are noisy. I just want it to be quiet ... in here,” she motioned to her temple. “How did you know?”

“You are two things. Either you are running from your source of fear or you are returning to confront it. Fairy tales teach us this. You are returning, I take it.”

“Yes, home.”

“It was not a question but home is best. Home is always such when your life is turned around. I, myself, am on my way to my own home, that great claim on my heart. Indeed, the soil grows roots there that are fed by our souls. Now, how did you come to find yourself on this plane?”

The child sighed and it was the sound of loss; familiarity and finality stirred together. What a drink that was, so accustomed to it as I had been. It was how we all would greet death, with a raised glass of extinguished energy.

I touched her hand in sympathy and the bracelets jangled and jangled. It was strength to walk with your forebears. From each bone spoke the voice of an elder, assurance that we were never alone. Suddenly, I stood in the middle of a forest that had been cleared by fire. In the centre of the blackened earth, stood the child and, around her, were the shadows of trees long lost to us. Pain sang in the air, a lean grey lute spotted with age. The sun had fractured already, too fragile to circle the hurt of the world below. A thick fog rolled and rolled around us; an unfurling rose tinged with the lightest of pinks at the edges. Yet, the sickening gloom brought forth the crying of babes.

“... him. Me. Everything I believe in.” She had started confessing her soul in the midst of that fog; the bloom of that misty rose was her release.

“Belief is a soul filled with the music of hope. When your entire soul sings this music, your eyes should dance but your music-box is broken.” From the edges of the fog, other voices tugged and tussled at the chords, the chorus comprising every other voice but hers. “There is no gentle harp or guileless violin behind those eyes but a hurricane inside you.”

“Hurricanes run through everything in their path, like peacocks. Noisy, too.”

“Hurricanes are purposeful in their own right, although we have been taught to fear them. In your life you will need the power of both hurricanes; those that can clear and those that can destroy. You need only to know the difference between them. Peacocks are another story.”

“How can I tell the difference?”

“That is best learnt through stories.”

The passenger in the row behind us got up to use the lavatory. It was a child. His father’s apologies were brief to their companion. He was a hard man who pulled on Charu’s hair as he shifted positions to allow his son to exit the row.

She swung her hair to the front, possessively and protectively. A strand came away on the seat and I plucked it up, holding it to the light from the window. “Men have caused women much more pain than this, much of what we cannot voice in the light of day. It is the price of the wedding dress, suffocating garment as that is. *This* will be payment for your story.”

“That is an odd payment.” She raised an eyebrow and I knew her thoughts.

“Child, your soul is tired.” The pills had turned her thoughts loose but those antiquated attitudes left a bitter taste in my mouth. The bracelets jangled and jangled. “However, there is no foul magic performed here.”

“My mother often told me stories of *oja*, performed with a person’s hair or nail clippings. She would warn me against clipping my toe nails outside or cutting my hair at Aunty Rameela’s home salon. She would unclog the bathroom drains herself after she washed her hair, not trusting the maid.”

“Trust is hard to come by. It is a smart woman who measures her trust before it is released.”

“Tedious, really. Every strand of hair was picked up and disposed of in two ways. Either she would wrap it in paper so that it would go unseen in the garbage or she would knot the strands together and mix it with rough grains of salt, mustard seeds and dried red chillies. She would turn the bundle around my head before one of us would spit into it – three times – before setting it alight.”

Another sigh. I felt the years roll around in it. The fog was almost completely gone now.



“*For* bad luck, she would say and I always knew that to mean that it would keep the bad luck *away*. The salt, the seeds and the chillies draw out negative energies or ‘evil,’ as we were told. It is quite common to find coarse grains of salt or mustard seeds in the corners of Indian homes. The corners are the thing. A hiding point between two ends in which evil housed itself, protected and watchful. Chillies should always be hung over doorways. Once they dried and turned brown, they were burnt. Fire was the one thing that broke a specific form of energy. It worked on the principle that if a spirit was energy, then, burning it would release it. I was still unclear on the significance of spitting. However, my grandmother had once told me as she tucked me into my blanket, that if I was afraid at night, I should swear and spit at anything that moved. Then, she taught me the meanings of *chut mari*, *madhir chod* and *chodu ram*. There was a sing-song quality to the words that landed both of us in a *hunda* of trouble when I tried them out at my uncle’s funeral.”

And, like that, her words were found and found. Most just needed a catalyst.

“A woman has great pride in a child, be it parent or grandparent. A child has equal pride in its parent or grandparent. When there are things we cannot say to our children, we tell them stories. You will be a mother soon. You must have stories to tell.”

“*How?*” Charu smacked her palm on the armrest, igniting the service bell.

“New life is hard to hide.” I motioned to her stomach. It is said that every girl dreams of her wedding day but that is not so. We are taught this. Both girls and boys are taught this in that first moment of equality and oppression. “If we are to think about weddings, then we are to think about the wedding dress, first, and the groom second. Well, child, that is not necessarily needed for a wedding. Many marry for different reasons. And, now, your story of *The First Husband* and *The Seventh Wife*.”

I tucked the hair away, safely. Charu’s mother had been right to warn her daughter; there was power in the littlest of things.

“Once upon a time, there was a man who would marry only virgins. Little was known about him except his vast fortune and the smell of the snake oil used to slick back his hair. The look and smell of a gentleman, as well as the talk of his wealth did much to blur the number of wives he had taken over the years. There had been six in total at the start of our story.

Women were a field of flowers for him, drawn as the bud to the sun. In his time, he had the pick of the women in whatever town he chose. As he was a traveller, he had never chosen his

wives from the same town, twice. Child, a flower does not fight the hand that picks it. It may have thorns, but they are nothing aside from a trifling nuisance. Instead, it is confined to a slow, desperate death in a tiny vial of liquid, perfuming the air with the sweet acrid stench of loss. And The First Husband filled those rooms with that stench, daily, as a reminder, of these things.”

A stifled gasp escaped her, strangled and mangled as it was.

“No one knew, of course, the reasons for his actions. Wealth excuses many eccentricities. Each time he would wed, The First Husband would create a spectacle; four weeks of circuses, dances and all manners of cakes to which every young woman of marriageable age and her father were welcomed. He would ship in the most exotic fruit and the most foreign wine but he, himself, favoured only the green bottles labelled with a red rose. There would be candles, incense and magic enough so that many would forget the rumours that slunk after him and forgive the extra snake oil he would slide through his hair. The Seventh Wife was the youngest of her sisters and the bravest. When all of the sisters had met The First Husband, they had all been riveted by his showcase of wealth. Yet, as their interactions increased, the sisters felt less and less comfortable in his presence and in the way his hair did not move. Nothing moved, one would remark later, except for his eyes.”

“They always find you. You cannot hide. Like the peacock’s, the eyes are not alive,” Charu muttered and I knew I had to hasten my tale.

Dark and consuming, beady and watchful, the sisters would make their excuses to be away from him. It was only the youngest sister who kept listening, who had fallen under the thrall of adventure and worldliness. Her eyes, two grey eels frozen in ice, were always upon him. I do not think that he had ever cared for women, nor women for him. It was more of what he could offer them and women were always in search of what was best on offer. But the youngest sister would neither be his first nor his last offering. A creature like that always had a hundred eyes watching him like a peacock, yes. But, when he chose her, all eyes fell on her. She knew, too. Her neck shot up taller, her chin a little longer and her back straighter. Her nights, and life, took on a different hue. She liked the artist and he enjoyed the paintbrush. And, so, they were married but, on that first night, The First Husband had a strange request for his new wife.”

“What was it?” I had her interest piqued, as was the power of such tales. Stories were the way we existed. Take two people who had nothing in common, tell them a story and that was how nations were built.

“Well, amongst other things to which young ears should not hear ...” I lifted my chin to the returning child and Charu grabbed her hair until the boy was secured in his seat. “The First Husband made his wife promise to wear her wedding dress to supper every night. Every night, child! Can you imagine a man who dictates the very stitches on your back?”

Her eyes fell to her bag and I knew her answer.

“Of course, she did not mind. She believed him to be romantic and, so, she happily wore the dress *every* night. And, every night, he happily removed it. She believed the light shining behind his obsidian eyes was love. She believed herself worshipped by his hands. She believed herself protected by his big house and unbending rules. She believed she had achieved her happy ending. Yet, happy endings are not always as we suppose them to be. And a man’s love can be a noose around your neck when the world is kicked out from under your feet.”

Her eyes flickered with memory. She was doing dark arithmetic behind those lost eyes.

“Several doors in his home would always remain locked. Candles stood in funereal sombreness along each of the walls that led to them, some taller than the trees that had lined the walls of the estate. The light of their flames was lost in the darkness of the unending corridors. The scent of lavender hung in the air masking some odour beneath it, like the smell of skin after the body had been set alight on the stake.”

We both wrinkled our noses.

“The servants would not look her in the eye. She was instructed not to journey to the attic or the wine cellar. She could walk through the extensive grounds but not through the family cemetery or the crypt that stood dead centre in it. She would always sleep with him every night, whether she was in the grip of the womanly woes or not. She was not to ask about his affairs; business or romantic. She was given a set of keys, one for every room in the house, but she was forbidden to open any door unless he was with her. So, she wandered through the mansion during the day, noting that the walls were laden with art and shelves lined with history but that there was little regarding family. For a man who sought a new bride every

two years, there was nothing to speak of the wives who had preceded her. “To the nunnery, they are,” the husband would say as he ran a finger down her cheek, trailed along her jaw and all the way down to her belly-button. He would always poke her there. “Best to leave them in the care of their god, do not you think?” To which she can only agree. How sad it is for a man to have his wives seek the austere life of a nun when there were so many riches that he had offered? Yet, every night, she put on that damnable dress and sat at his left hand while they ate.”

My companion shifted. I watched her, uneasy as she was in her skin as a snake was before it shed.

“When the lace began to tighten, The First Husband leaned over his plate to her and poked her belly-button. “My, my, dear wife, what do we have here?” His wife, being too young to be wise, pointed out the places where the buttons struggled against their holes, where the bodice stretched when it should have cinched and where the lace had torn. The First Husband left his dinner and circled his seventh wife like a lion would a zebra separated from its herd. He picked up her knife and liberated the row of buttons that held up the dress at the back from its struggles. He sliced through the bodice, following every stitch of complaint. He picked at the lace, sometimes drawing blood, but his poor bride, so completely terrified was she by the fervent look of obsidian glee in his eyes, was rendered mute. It was the first time that his eyes had sparked to life, but it was not love that kindled it. A pure white dress, so clean but so mishandled, had become our young bride’s interminable prison sentence.”

“She had to fit herself into her own prison.” Understanding dawned on young Charu. She was a smart one, just not a loud one.

“Mmh ... and I am quite certain that it itched but do you know what happens at the end of a prison sentence?”

“I feel like this is not going to end well.” She winced, trying to squelch her fears.

“Death is not a ‘well’ way to end things.” Women are strong, I believed, stronger than any dragon or wizard in any story. My story had none of that, perhaps just a little magic but that was left for Charu to decide. This, however, was where the fairy tale ended. “The food forgotten, the husband dragged his young wife to her feet. It did not take much muscle to do so for she was a tiny slip of a girl and he quite burly. Yet, he liked the theatre of it. A great showman he was, too. Rumours had circled that he had worked at the circus as a child, hence

the strength and spectacle that he enjoyed, shown when he went about choosing a young bride. By some manner not yet brought to the light of day, he purchased circuses and amassed his great fortune by selling off its oddities. Child, do not raise your eyebrows at me. Do you have any notion of how much the indecent sort of folk would pay for a Nubian fire-eater? I do. A person sold to a man who did not speak her language which meant that he had little idea of how to care for her talents and, s—”

The plane dipped and every piece of legacy on my bracelet jangled and jangled. My companion gripped the edge of the hand rest and I saw strength there, strength to live. It was a hopeful sign. When the pilot’s apology hushed the cabin, I continued my tale.

“Nobility, as they had called themselves, was just a word. There is no substance beneath such things; nothing to inform it. It is that orchid that grows without the earth feeding it. But, unlike the orchid, these creatures are parasites, clinging to the children of the earth and taking from them to make themselves look better. So, The Seventh Wife stumbled behind The First Husband as he opened every door in the house. There were seven doors in total, each with a portrait of a woman in a white dress ... even the last one. Around the heavily curtained and scented rooms lay dust atop dust atop the feminine vanities. In that first room, a portrait of a raven-haired woman in white hung above an ivory mirror. He addressed it by name, speaking as if to an animated companion. Before they left that room, he looked into that mirror and tucked an invisible strand of his hair back into place. At the second portrait, he dusted his eyebrow and smoothed some of the strands behind his ears as he spoke. By the time they had reached the sixth room, his hair was shooting out in tufts, the charm of the snake oil failing.”

By now, my young Charu knew where this story was going. Her uneasiness on her seat had little to do with the suffocating cabin space.

“The seventh door was The Seventh Wife’s bedroom, although she had not ever spent a night in there in her life. He led her in a circle in the great room and asked her to choose where she would like her portrait to hang. The poor thing had turned to ice by this time. Grinning, The First Husband answered his own question, choosing a spot beside the door, and dragged her down the thirteen steps that led straight into the wine cellar. They walked down a long corridor that greeted them only with coldness. It had been made of uneven stones and wood that stretched out on either end, reaching into the darkness to root itself. Her bare feet were soft against the stones as she was forced along, finding a single heavy oak door in the middle of the corridor with thick iron fastenings, a part of the original building.”

“Werewolf ...”

I dismissed her summation with a gust of breath. “Quick, nervous steps followed by heavy boots bounced off the flagstones. The Seventh Wife noted all the unopened bottles of wine, each with the red-rose label upon them and a suspicious glow about the dark liquid in each bottle. They looked to be gems hidden in liquid but each one carried with it the acrid scent of age and copper nails. The Seventh Wife had been glad that she had not been offered to indulge in the nightly glass of wine that her husband favoured. No matter how foul the day, he seemed to relax once the liquid hit his palate but she had not never found the taste for it.”

Charu lifted her hand and pointed. “I see two Miris ... three ...”

“Perhaps, sweet child. *We are* never alone but we are, also, what we ingest. Those pills may be affecting you more than you had anticipated. Why take them?”

“Why do you care?” Her eyes blazed in indignation and it was good to see a little fire there.

“Every woman’s trouble is another woman’s trouble. It is the sisterhood.” The crease of her brow was heavy but some secrets could not be shared, not even to alleviate confusion.

“Behind the very last casket ... I mean ‘cask’ of wine ... there lay another door. The First Husband – old now for the trip around the mansion had greyed his hair, drawn lines around his face and caused liver spots to speckle his exposed forearms – brandished a key from the inner pocket of his pants. At this point, his hair was as wild as his eyes. With a bark of delight, he swung open that last door and the poor wife fainted on the spot.”

“Vampire!” She clicked her fingers and I shook my head.

“Would that she had died have been a better fate for her. Alas, no such mercy existed for her. Instead, my child, she was laid out upon a stone slab by servants who did not look at her even then. Leather shackles bound to iron fastenings hammered into that stone slab held every limb that she possessed except for her left arm. That was extended to her side and cruelly bent to allow for a tiny needle attached to a pipe to be stuck into her. She slept through it all, her mind telling her body that she would be too overwhelmed to handle such things.”

The child before me shivered. Yes, some men were beasts but, unlike beasts, their cruelties were immeasurable.

“When her mind had fatigued itself, she awoke but, to her surprise, could not move. She called out for her husband before realising where she was and who had put her there. There were cracks in the wall, slivers of age, and through them shone the light of the Harvest Moon. Squinting into the darkness into which the slivers ran, she lost the mind that had worn itself out in trying to protect her.

“Six stone slabs surrounded her. Each stood upright. Each was festooned with the body of a young lady whose portrait hung in one of the rooms upstairs and whose doors had always remained locked on every other night but this night. Each still wore the white dress of intention with a slit down the swollen bump of its wearer’s belly. Each looked at The Seventh Wife with still eyes. Blood circus, villainous vaudeville; these were the horrors of The First Husband. In vain and pain, the new bride tried to reach for her stomach but, alas, the servants were adept at their job. The awkward twists and unnatural angles of the arms and legs of her husband’s previous wives told her that they had been trained on-the-job, as it were.”

I was glad, now, that the child had taken the pills. Perhaps, it was a saving grace for this story, so large were her eyes in horror.

“When The Seventh Wife’s mind broke, it forgot to tell her mouth to stop screaming. The next night, her husband came to inspect the reverse drip in her hand. His hair was calm once more, slicked down with his snake oil. Chatting as amiably as he had to her at all those dinners, he squeezed the contents already collected by that devilish contraption into a wine bottle and set the infernal red-rose label upon it. He took a pen and wrote The Seventh Wife’s name and the year of their marriage below the rose. Before he left, he kissed her upon the forehead and she smelled the snake oil in his hair. It wrinkled her nose now but that was about the extent of the freedom that was rendered to her. At the door, The First Husband turned and ordered the servant to slice out her tongue. Then, he took the bottle of wine up to dinner to meet the parents of his next bride.”

A shadow fell across me and the child yelped.

“Sorry, ma’am, but you have the service light on. Can I get you anything?”

I do not think that the cabin attendant had heard my story for her smile was unwrinkled and her eyes light. Charu nodded her apology and we were left alone once more.

“How did you know about the baby?”

“Now, you may rest, child. We have heard your story but your journey has long yet to begin.” Some words of hardship and being battled out from a sleep-thickened tongue. They were lethargic flies that had gorged themselves on honey. “Who we are matters only to those who offend us. True witches still walk among you. They are the granddaughters of the women your forefathers could not burn, who learnt to breathe soot and feed on ash whilst moulding their weary souls from the flames. We do not burn anymore. We have freed ourselves. We wish the same for you.”

Perhaps, women had to be their own rescuers.



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*The princess had to sleep on a pile of mattresses. Soft were they, cushioned was her rest aside from the feeling of being supremely unsettled. Layers and layers of comfort and warmth were provided by those mattresses but that pea-sized feeling would always irk her.*

*People will tell the story of a princess who fell on hard times and asleep on a rotten pea. They will leave out the parts of her story that are the most important; that she was never fully settled in her own skin, to the life into which she had been born and the smile she had to wear.*

*Ignorance is bliss, they say, and the most blissful was a young bride unaware of the true nature of the man who would be her husband. The converse was equally true. Men threw out words like 'spoilt' or 'impure' without shame whilst mirrors would prove both genders the same.*

*The story of marriage is an axe to the whispers of loneliness but it is not a cure to it. Many women have found themselves twice as isolated with the cold gold around their fingers as those with free fingers.*

*The story of my husband will be sung to the lovely clang of cymbals, of drumbeats and fancies of little girls whilst I am abandoned to the earth once more, left to my two sons and my nightmares of that beast. I have only fairy tales to tell my children and I will turn their father into one. As charming a man he was, as glorious his tales, it is how a man treats a wife that is the truth hidden from the world. I am known as the perfect wife, a princess and a queen, but marriage was my curse. I was born to the earth and to the earth I will return, to the freedom of the loose grains of sand where the sea grants me free passage and liberty to travel as I will and the creatures do not turn their faces from me. My story shall end here. God, the greatest writer of stories would make that future a certainty. It was only my present through which I had to succeed.*

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*“The ways of Providence are most perverse and strange: He creates, maintains and then destroys. God’s designs are as silly as child’s play ...*

*It is nobody’s fault; sorrow and joy, loss and gain are determined by our past actions. The inexorable ways of Providence are known to God alone, who dispenses all kinds of fruits, both good and evil. God’s commands prevail over all ...”*

*(Sri Ramacharitamanasa, Ayodhya–Kanda, 281, 1–4, p.603)*

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Afternoon.

Home.

It was the gentle tug of a meagre portion of the earth; roots that fed your soul, had said Miri. It had always been the hours in that day that tested you, that stole you from your home. Words soured your return as well when all you needed was a stop, a respite, at that day’s end.

Very little had changed in Links and there was comfort in that. Links was easy to describe to the wayward traveller. All you had to imagine was the busiest and most dazzling city that you knew ... and this was a four-hour journey from it. There were no trains to and from Links except Badger, the old coal train. No buses. No airports. The irony of the name was not missed by anyone. It was if the town had died, tossed between the mountains and ocean ... to be forgotten. We called it Tin Can-yon, an inside joke. It was the sound that the rain made on tin cans as they fell. Hollow. Empty. That was life here. However, by some miraculous hand, it had continued on but not in step with the times.

‘Odd-Job’ Bheki was a staple here. He was an elderly man with four children of his own and a fifth on its way by Christmas. His life was as his name implied but he was the one person everyone in town knew to call for anything. His voice was invested with the timbre of a man secure with his life and with belief in his decisions. As laughter echoed through the memories he shared of his family, my eye followed the old roads that were etched into my heart. As

Bheki pulled into one familiar lane after another, a thrumming started in that hollow organ with reverberations matching Bheki's voice. It surged and shifted through my body as the car moved through memories. Bheki followed them and I believed that they were imprinted upon him as they were on mine. Down all of the lanes were all of the choices I had made. All the while, the messages kept piling up on my phone.

We drove along the familiar roads – South Beach, Herring, Kingclip, Salmon, Carp and Beachway – as Bheki detailed the struggle with the sardine runs this year and the fines for the women who offer saris at the shore in hopes abundant. He drove without additional directions or destination until night crept across the sky. Four hours in the back of Bheki's little Vauxhall before –

“Stop, please.”

“Sure, madam, but this place is not very ... anymore ...”

His words were lost in the perpetual mist that besieged Liloche as soon as I got out of the car and trudged towards the quaint little pier with its flaking floorboards and badly painted handrails. The shoes had been white at the start of this endeavour. They had gotten lost in the London streets, gotten turned around in the underground and survived the airport only to have the soggy earth around Liloche change that.

I breathed in the damp night air. The October nights had always been painfully beautiful here, if not slightly mossy. It was a smell that wrinkled the nose but not much else. The ‘pier’ was but a wooden construct that allowed people to sit and dip their legs into the water below, that too at the risk of infections from water and wood alike. It was built for a wealthy merchant's children to play before the child had been lost to the water. Some say that the merchant still lived, others that he had been possessed by the Seven Sisters, loose spirits that sat on wild women's heads at night and whispered insanity into their ears. The place had become a conservation area, tied to our town hall, The Rotunda. The water was trapped between the two places with nowhere to go.

Like the town, Liloche had fallen behind in the dance of time. It was not a family spot as no mother with an ounce of sense would allow her child to get on, much less dive off, the mossy planks of the pier. Neither was it a lover's nook as the jacaranda trees to the left did not offer much privacy from prying eyes. It was just a quiet place where nature rested and people came to forget the world around them. Yet, most nights, the trees stood in wait, holding their

breaths and clutching secrets they would not reveal. Time stood still on this pier. Yet, for me, a lifetime had slipped by. It was like putting on an old pair of shoes and finding that they did not fit the way they once had.

Relationships were the same, especially the ones you had with yourself. Coming home, though, was like a snake slipping back into the skin it had shed.

I had been counting the beeps. Forty-seven, in all. Every time I heard one of them, I was reminded of the smallness of my world and the tenuous claims I had on it. With a sigh, I took out my phone. A stray wind wrapped itself around my shoulders and I shivered with every step but I kept walking, right until the edge of the water where I had watched the fireflies in my childhood. The water was changing, harsher now, raking the sand with angry lashes and bullying the exposed bank. It was not calm or still as I had remembered it. It distorted my reflection upon its surface. I watched, suddenly fascinated and daring ... with the phone in my hand. It would be so easy ...

A crack sounded behind me and shook me from my reflection. I clutched the phone as a weapon. Bheki had tried to caution me but I knew his warning already. A community like ours did not suffer any scandals. We prided ourselves on being good, honest, salt-of-the-earth people but there had been seven unsolved murders in the town. Each had been staged the same way. Young women, newly married, with blood cascading down their naked backs in elegant tangles as their hair would have done. Yet, these women had been scalped, what remained of their skin singed as they lay for their funeral pyre. The police had not told us if that had been done whilst they had been alive or not. Whispers of more women being found persisted through the years, like drafts through cracks in an old wooden house, making its inhabitants draw their shawls about their shoulders and huddle into themselves. Not one of us could believe our neighbours – of men with families or sons with sisters – capable of such a thing but not any of us were above suspicion from one another. Appearances and family values were a dangerous cocktail when mixed with suspicion.

The moniker of the ‘Seven Sisters,’ having nothing to do with the original superstitions, had stuck although the years had seen many more women found seated beneath the trees with their throats slit and their hands and feet bound in rope. The skin below each of their eyes had been sliced open, allowing blood to run down their cheeks and necks as if it had been tears. Their blood, the same rich red as the wilting blooms of the *ashoka*, had been splashed across the front pages of the *Times* and *Tribune*. It was death set on vivid display against the sunken

coldness of the pier. For two decades the person responsible had been as loose as one of those winds. If the sins of the father were visited upon the son, then it was the women who suffered the sins of men. The Sitas, they were later renamed, and so my name had changed along with it.

The air snapped at me, the winds swirling like a cat o' nine tails, and I drew the *shahtoosh* to my neck. In any other country it would have been an outlawed artefact, banned for the cruelty to which it lent itself, but it was an heirloom and it smelled of the years spent in a heavy sleeper Kist; a wedding gift from Ash. Yet, the cruel shawl could not stave off the wind or the knowledge that it carried. I knew where those winds had come from; galvanised ribbons of air that flagellated around me in reproach.

A playground had been forced upon the opposing bank; complete with metal swings and bucket seats, wooden stack-houses and tin slides. Not a single person could force the townspeople to play upon those grounds. Yet, the swings still swung; their creaking loneliness carried through the mists. The mist had hidden the crimes and the bodies of The Sitas along with the identity of their murderer, but the detectives had been more fascinated by those damnable swings; each creak causing another cigarette to be lit.

If it had not been for Badger losing a wheel on the railway line, not one of the unfortunate souls would have been discovered. Words feel thick and fast off the drunken tongues of the workmen who had sat upon Badger that first day but, as even more bodies were unearthed, even their tongues were soon stilled. Mothers brought their daughters in at night and fathers went without grandchildren for suspicion bred when knowledge was absent. Something waited in the mists that laced around the pier, something that hid between the trees and cackled at the dead brought to it in sacrifice.

“It is beautiful out here,” a voice, barely audible over my thoughts and the slight wind that had picked up, said from over my shoulder. It was a low voice but an honest one, the kind that did not lend itself to any danger.

“You’re not from around here, I take it.” A hand was stuck out in front of me.

“You dropped this.” The betraying red light blinked at me. West Egg lawn ...

“Oh, I didn’t even feel it come off.” I took the *tisek* that had mysteriously fallen off my finger. “But, thank you ... er?”

“Bartholomew East. It’s a mouthful so people usually call me Barry. Two names, same man.” He scratched the back of his neck below the tousled mane of hair that was in sore need of some brushing. The hood of his brick-red jacket might have helped to conceal it but the wind had other ideas. There was a swatch of purple at the bottom and what looked like the gold crest of a rugby league insignia. “Apologies, I saw the ring on the ground and you were walking away from it. Were you talking on the phone?”

“No, I usually talk to myself,” I said quickly, then slapped my palm to my face.

Barry laughed and my back straightened at the warmth in that singular sound.

“Oh, no worries. I am the same.” His smile was wide, a little lopsided. “That bad habit started very young. People did not understand dyslexia back then. They thought that I was just ‘slow’ so they made me read everything aloud. If you think kids are mean, wait until you hear what their parents have to say.”

The laugh that tore out of me ended in a snort. Barry’s eyes lit up, incredulous at the sound. It delighted him ... and I was unfamiliar with that. It made me feel warm inside; hot water thrown into cold cement. “Sorry, but you have obviously never heard what an Indian girl’s parents have to say.”

“I’m sure that they would be nothing but flattering,” he said as he waggled his eyebrows at me.

I smiled at the gesture. It was so very human. I wanted to keep talking to him, to see what he did next ... so I said the first thing that came to mind.

“We used to have fireflies around here.”

“Fireflies?” Barry asked, looking around as if they were already upon him and started swatting them. He smiled at me, his Shakespearean moment over. “I hate bugs.”

I only noticed it then, stuck as I had been in my own head. Barry East was the type of guy unafraid of making a fool of himself. How different ...

“No need to worry. I haven’t seen them since I was a child. I used to sit at that pier with my mother. I remember begging her to stay still, to let them fly around us. I even held her hands so she wouldn’t swat them when they flew by our heads. They were witches, she told me, and on glowing broomsticks so other witches could see them at night. Reflector lights for broom-

mobiles.” My companion smiled revealing small, even teeth, his canines firmly in place. “To me, they looked like tiny moving moons ... magic just within reach.”

“So many memories, eh? Do you live here?” He folded his arms and looked down at me. I saw only interest lighting up those blue eyes.

“I used to. I’m now a memory away.”

“Ah, I think I know what you mean. I have a library of memories to visit. I keep travelling about the place. It’s the freedom of it, you know? Are you back home for family?” It was strange having someone who asked a question and, then, looked at you as if the answer mattered.

“For a wedding,” I skirted the issue. “You?”

“The complete opposite, I’m afraid. I’m here for a funeral. My Aunty Rose’s husband passed on. We are going to drive up to the mountains and release my uncle’s ashes into the wind. Hopefully, we don’t get any of Uncle Francois on us. If you’d like to join us, then—” Lightning lit up the sky above us and we both ducked. We looked at each other when it had passed and laughed. “Well, there might be a bit of a wait.”

“Maybe not,” I smiled at him. “This entire half of the country is pretty sleepy – unconscious, really – when it comes to natural catastrophes. The rains are all we have.”

“Yeah?” He chuckled then held his hand out and I did not flinch away. I saw the tiny rose patterns on his cuff. “I’ll save my number on your phone and leave the ball in your court. If you can make it, I’d love to see you on Friday, just before the clock strikes midnight.”

Something tugged loose in me. The cement was chipping.

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Bheki’s chatter on the ride back home was the sound of dry logs cracking in a fire. My head was righting itself as he spoke. The deep content that fed a person’s voice had such power. It calmed the blood; set straight fingers down the soul. I rolled down the window as we passed Ash’s old house, ever closer to home. The wind whipped passed me and the salt it carried stung me, sharp and familiar. I sighed and closed my eyes, letting a complete stranger’s voice wash over me like the sound of the ocean I had missed so much.

The old house was on the left, brick and stone, stuck between intersecting rows of aged gum trees whose trunks were grey and weathered, chapped as the bones of corpses drying in the desert, but those branches grabbed at the sky, scraping the sun. The ocean receded when I saw it, the calmness along with it. The two-storey house held cupboard walls with pencil scribbles, a wobbly chair at a six-seater table, pockmarked wooden floors and the softest yellow lights – the colour of my childhood. This was the family home. The bricks had been laid with memories, cemented by responsibility, with stones that had been quarried from obligation. Those in the coastal towns had been shipped in to work in the cane fields but those in the ships that followed had been tagged for the mines. Two generations had already lived there. If I married, I would move in here as well.

*Ashoka* trees grew on the land unclaimed by the rocks on which their blood had dripped. Nani had said that the leaves of the *ashoka* had been granted one job in all of the forest, and that was to allow no sorrows or sadness beneath them. A woman may sit under the evergreen leaves without her grief. The old stories that she had told my cousins and me on evenings spent on her lap recounted how its seeds helped a mother to bear a child, a child to breathe and those leaves, once smooth and rising to the sun, darkened and crinkled with the sadness of Mother Sita. From that moment of great sadness, the leaves had reached downward on the bough, struggling to alleviate her suffering. They had not succeeded and, so, are forever drooping. That one great misery had spawned untold more across the world.

People, shadow, shapes and items; all alive and all known filled the space of each room. My mother's straight silhouette was easy to find even from the pavement upon which Bheki had left me. I watched Madhuri Sharma move through the house from the outside; ghosts must feel as I did. The windows were always spotless, so much so that even from the outside I could see the photographs that filled the walls, the shelves and the stairway. My life had been laid out in print from the first black and white bath in the green tub, now discarded in the backyard, to the last explosion of colour of the engagement party. Even had the curtains been drawn and the house plunged in darkness, I would have known where each photograph had been placed. There had been no movement in that home, no change, like the vase that sat in the middle of the window or the doily that had been placed under it. Even life had moved around it.

*What would people say?*



I had snuck a peek at my phone when Barry had added his number. The last message was an impossible target to miss for an Indian family. It was the alpha and the omega of success and shame. A chill, colder than the autumn's wind, went through me as I looked up at the house with its bay windows and stalwart façade besieged by drying vines and crusty bins. A wicker chair in need of a reupholster's magic had been left on the balcony. There had once been two of these chairs, each with matching checked cushions. Its companion, fallen a casualty to the constant battle that time and wood waged on each other, had left its partner to fight on alone. Its audience, three haphazardly placed chairs on a balcony in the red-brick house across the road was still there. A skinny white pug tottered earnestly on the pavement below, following a shaggy mongrel. Both sniffed dolefully at the bins. The banana-yellow and white homes that flanked it had kept true to their original paint choices. No, nothing of true consequence changed in this town and, perhaps, that was a blessing. The unending passage of time here was ceaseless and goading, of that we were certain. The familiarity of it wove sure rugs.

The door opened and I was dragged inside, straight to the kitchen. My mother and her sister, Aunt Saroj, gave me quick hugs, a knife and a pot of washed *brinjals*. The latter cracked her knuckles against her temples, to remove the bad luck from my travels. I squeezed my eyes shut and started to slice the aubergines.

My visit to Britain had robbed me of a few days but it was a sacrifice for which I would gladly have given twice as many days. In the week that followed, names and faces from my twenty-odd years of life assembled themselves in No. 21 Ghosala Lane. Mostly, the women cooked and the men talked. The topics roamed in intersecting circles, slithering snake-like through each other, moving through rooms as would an errant draught. My wedding ceremony was to be held directly after my *hurdee* and *mehndi* ceremonies. I had argued for three days instead of the usual month-long festivities. Eagerness, our guests had thought when they had opened up the invitation and read the quick succession of dates.

I averted many questions by smiling and nodding at them. No one questioned my lack of justification. Indian girls are quiet, or should be. We do not talk because there is no one to hear us. We kept to the kitchens because there was noise there, even if not of our own voices. When the day of the *mehndi* dawned, I had not a single smile left, not even one to fool the mirror. Ash was not far from my mind, then. Thankfully, Indian girls are supposed to look demure during their wedding rites; to look down, to look respectful, to look sad.

“Don't make eye contact. That's too forward.”

“What will the boy’s people say if the girl looks them in the face?”

There was the difference between ‘looking’ and ‘being’ and the aunties were sure to draw attention to it. An ‘aunty’s’ cautionary look was as effective as all the words in the dictionary combined. So, under an encyclopaedia of eyes, I started the long journey of marriage. Each of my bridal events was to be held at The Rotunda. It was an old remnant from British colonisation; a missionary church with vaulted ceilings and a deep-set red stone tower. Rapunzel had been imprisoned there, I would tell myself of the stone and cement that conspired at every angle to trap and imprison little children in hour-long school events. However, the various architectural ‘renewals’ over the years had obscured its original purpose. Our lives probably started out that way, too, with the gods having one plan and us, humans, constantly viewing it as something under construction.

I would count every brick when I was a child forced to sit still through funerals or weddings with my legs crossed to be polite and to keep my pretty dresses unwrinkled to look neat. I would hear the boys running outside, laughing as they chased each other, and the squawks of hapless pigeons as their tranquillity was disturbed. Two of my female cousins whom I had never played with as a child, decked out in *chaniya cholis*, had been chosen to be the Indian equivalent of bridesmaids. They fussed over their *dupattas* as I struggled to shove my *lehenga* out of their father’s Mercedes Benz, the first ‘big car’ in our family.

As they checked each other’s pins and *tikkas*, instead of the bride’s, I realised that Champa and Ghanika were about as useful as a sack of potatoes without the potatoes. However, they were they were unmarried, and weddings were thin veils for the matchmaking endeavours of aunts and uncles with an eye on their child’s rising ages and retirement plans. Indian weddings were infamous social networking for marriage proposals.

The *ghungroos* were barely audible under the weight of my own thoughts and the rice pearls littering my *lehenga* as I climbed the stairs to the town hall alone. Thirty-nine steps taken in golden heels and I felt less like a princess at the end of them. It was too late to change my shoes as I stood before a pair of stained-glass doors. The interlocking lotus patterns on them could not hide the number of people that had come for the free food and gossip. Nor could it obscure the gilded Ganesha placed in the exact centre of the large oval room that lay beyond. That was Guru Mackey’s doing, without a doubt. If anyone had wanted to turn an event into a statement, the resident priest of the Jhansi-Bridge Park area was the one to call. All you had to do was ensure that there was enough *paan* and betel nut for him to chew as he spoke to

you. Granted, most would land on the side of your face during that conversation but the short, sharp-faced man went about his business as an undisputed perfectionist.

Swishing my *lehenga*, I chided the sisters. *Lehengas* had a language all of their own. They could show coyness, flirtation, anger, pride, respect and wealth. An entire movie genre had been based upon this. Right now, the *swish-swash* showed a shipload of annoyance. I clicked my tongue as the sisters sashayed up the thirty-nine steps, their clothes heavier than mine. Just at the top, I greeted them with folded arms and a tapping gold heel. They stopped and looked at me, wondering at my dead eyes and flat mouth.

“Forgot!” Champa said when her mistake hit her and bumbled her way back to the car. The *clack-clack-clack* of too-big feet on too-small heels echoed across the parking lot. Ghanika met her half way, taking the boxes that contained the *diyas* and their holders. Turning on my heel, I waited as the sisters lit the *diyas*, opened the doors and led the way into the hall. I touched Ganesha’s feet on my way in but did not know what to ask him.

A long entrance led to a massive middle hall with radiating wide corridors which fed into smaller rooms that now served as administrative offices. As the venue’s personal manager, because even holy men need a day job, Guru Mackey had the largest of these outer rooms and it was deserved, for the reputation of The Rotunda had been boosted by his fine eye for detail and his astute picking of its patrons. Having an event in the town hall was coupled with gossip and curiosity. There had been enough swirling around this little town to even detangle truth from non-truth, as swaddled and coddled those twins were. Under Ganesha’s lotus-shaped blue eyes, I had a flash of another set of blue eyes and pulled out the last remnant of a smile.

“Look down.”

“Don’t make eye contact.”

“Don’t smile.”

“Look sad.”

“No teeth for the cameraman.”

The aunties flocked around me and I could only listen to their instructions. My palms were folded together in the international gesture of piety and prayer. This was a pose all Indian

girls were taught before holding their pencil or curry spoons. I was a slow step behind the sisters – a task easily accomplished by the weight of my *lehenga* and my golden heels – giving them enough time to fan out and attract attention. Their outfits were gaudier than mine, their hairstyles more elaborate and their heels taller. Wearing the traditional *bandhani* print of red and orange, with simple strings of jasmine woven into my hair and my gilded shoes that I would have to remove for the *mehndi* to be applied, I looked more like a guest than the bride in comparison to the sisters. In fact, it looked more to be like their wedding week than mine ... and I wished that it had been.

Bharati, the *mehndi* artist we had hired, was already on stage. My mother stood across from her with Aunt Saroj's hand on her arm. A look of horror was stretched out on her face; Bharati was rearranging the furniture and clearing a space on the stage for her to work. A tightly packed bouquet of yellow roses was thrust into my hands. Yellow was the traditional *hurdee* colour but, with the décor of the hall being taken into account for both nights, we had decided to recycle the stage dressings and flowers. I took the bouquet over to the side of the hall as Bharati fussed and my mother's eyes bulged. A bruised yellow rose sticking out at the corner caught my eye. Someone had tried to push the bud into formation, to even out the pattern. Obviously, it did not fit, needing more space and leaning on the rose next to it for support. It looked pale from its lack of water and I doubted that its stem even touched the foamy oasis beneath it. On a whim, I pulled out the stunted bloom, sad that it had not received the chance of freeing its petals, and used the row of glass windows in front of me to stick it in my hair. The thought occurred to me that leaping through the glass into the garden below was feasible and, even in my *lehenga*, achievable.

Movement in the adjoining room caught my eye. It would have been a challenge to see through the frosted glass doors but a squat man with bifocals pushed through them and left the door ajar. A circle of people stood around a coffin, a respectful distance away from a lady in a white sari. The widow, I knew instantly, because tradition dictated that a woman deprived of a husband should be deprived of colour and joy in her life, too. The same could not be said of a widower.

Champa and Ghanika were fussing with stools and cushions as I watched the widow perform the age-old tradition of a goodbye; a flower turned around the head, sandalwood turned around the body and a prayer kept for the soul. Closure, it was believed, came from such acts and rituals. Still, I watched the widow, felt her reverence and saw her pinch her lips together

as she bent to her husband's ear to whisper. She turned before she left his side and our eyes caught each other.

Slowly, she dropped her gaze, taking in the dazzling *sirbindi*, bell *jhumkis*, the looped *naak phulni*, gold choker, my grandmother's Kruger coin pendant that would be joined on the wedding day by a *mangalsutra*, the gem-studded *kamarbandh* around the green and gold waist of the *chaniya choli*, the clanging *kunguns* surrounding the glass bangles at my wrists, the rings of my foremothers, the *tisek* that had intriguingly shrunk in size and could not be removed from my fat fingers, the stone-set *hathpool* pair on my hands and the *ghungroos* around my feet. All of it was in stark contrast to her white cotton sari. Past met future and future met past. On the day I lost my husband, I would be stripped of all colour and jewellery and my glass bangles broken on the dry earth beside his body.

I walked towards her but she backed away. Just as I closed the distance between us, the door screeched shut and Guru Mackey pounced between us. He started apologising profusely. It was bad luck to have a widow touch a bride.

"Stop," I lifted my palm to his face, an action for which I would have been publicly censured if my mother had seen it.

"I am so sorry, *bachcha*, so sorry." He checked the door again. "*Kharaab kismat. Nahin, nahin, bachcha*, come, come ..."

"Did you apply lotion today?" A mass of brown curls swung in my direction.

"No," I replied, stumbling over my shoes as I took my designated place on the dais.

"Good, I will start with your feet."

My imitation of a statue was required for three hours. Bharati decorated the backs of my hands, arms, feet and legs with the paste at The Rotunda. The food was served forty minutes into the event when the crowd had started to rumble. The tea service ran an hour after supper, with biscuits and sweetmeats lifting the mood of the crowd and increasing their risk of diabetes. After the caterer's supply was depleted, the crowd started to thin. Those that remained were close family and friends, Ash being one of them. Yet, even for her, I could not find a smile.

Bharati continued with her work on the front of my arms and remainder of my legs well into the night at the light brick house. The hands she had left for last. Previously, only the women of the bride's family were allowed to touch her, so the *mehndi* artist would have to be one of her own family members. In total, I had already spent five hours without a toilet break or an offer of *burfee*. Returned to the family surroundings of the family home, people milled about as they pleased. Most were concentrated around three sturdy pots on open fires in the backyard; *breyani*, *dhall* and *chai*. My uncle had appropriated one of the *hundas* for his *chai*. Others sat around two long tables pressing *veda*, balling up *gugulas* and boiling peanuts.

“Champa, take this big spoon and stir the nuts. See that nothing is burning underneath.”

“No problem,” Champa said to Aunty Rosie, although we could all see that it was a problem. Champa was strategically allergic to chores. The *click-clack-clack* of her heels walking around the table was a sign.

Aunty Saroj intervened in the way Indian aunties had perfected over the years. She smacked the *veda* mixture between her palms, the sound signalling that she wanted to speak. “Lucky, is your house sorted out now?”

“No, Saroj,” my uncle replied as he stirred his tea, “still haunted.”

Bharati and I looked between the two of them. Everyone else continued their chopping, peeling, rolling and squishing. I shook my head at her but Bharati, not being able to hold in the question, asked, “Uncle, how do you know it's haunted?”

Technically, Uncle Lucky was not the young *mehndi* artist's uncle. Nor was ‘Lucky’ his real name. Lakraj had been his family's name but kids and kin had changed it over the years. So, our ‘Uncle Lucky’ cleared his throat and we all groaned. It was story time.

“You know, *betee*, sometimes, there were voices from the other side of the doors. They were voices I did not know. Often a child's cry from an upstairs bedroom or a wife's screams from the living room. An elderly neighbour visited me – once – just the one time. She came for tea but spoke of the family who had lived there before me; a man with his second wife and their young child. She spoke with such great sadness of the child who was made from milk and honey and with a hair full of night. Lips so red, they looked like they bled beneath the skin. She spoke of the mother who worked night and day, night and day, as a nurse to put food on the table and keep the roof above them. She spoke of the father who sat at home massaging

his gimpy leg but with froglike eyes fastened on the child. She spoke and spoke of how late the mother would return from work, sometimes not seeing her daughter for days on end. The house was still as she spoke – silent – as if the walls were holding their breath and listening to our tiny conversation. She told me of their deaths, their murders. The husband, you see, he was possessed, believing that his first wife had been reborn as his daughter ...”

We all inched forward. Uncle Lucky was a great storyteller, although he sometimes took weeks to get to the end of a tale. Pensively, he looked into his teacup like a man seeing the ends of a story and tying them to the present.

“A man will take his privileges if he believes himself entitled to them. A woman will allow it if she believes it, too. But, a young girl, a child, not knowing anything else or having someone to guide her? What is there left to do?” Uncle Lucky scraped his moustache with a fingernail. “SJAMBOKS AND BUSHKNIVES! BAH! BAH! CHOP!”

Collectively, we all yelled. “UNCLE LUCKY!”

The old man laughed, slurping his tea with great content at the *tamasha* he had created and the moment was broken. Bharati swore under her breath, cleaning up the *mehndi* she had smudged in her moment of shock. When we had all resettled, Uncle Lucky set his shoulders and looked back into his teacup.

We were silent, the crackling of the fire the only sound and movement between us. I looked at my mother and she shook her head. Aunty Mina startled us when she started speaking, her fingers sticky with the *veda* mix.

“There was a story I remember. A woman in Phoenix had said that her car keys and glasses kept going missing. Her children all called her forgetful and old but she knew she was not over the hill. She resorted to getting duplicate keys and keeping spare spectacles in the car, but even those would vanish. One year, when her brother came over for Diwali, his keys also went missing.”

“She should have thrown mustard seeds and salt,” Aunty Krish said, rubbing her hands with oil for the *gugulas*. “Champa, food fell on the floor by the chair.”

“And burnt *lobaan*. That Rosewood brand is good,” Uncle Krish added as Champa side-stepped the *gugulas* that had fallen on the floor. *Click-clack-clack* went her heels.

“I thought that you hated it.” Aunty Krish smacked her husband on the arm, leaving an oil patch. “I thought it troubled your sinuses. Take a serviette, *betee*.”

“It does,” he shrugged his shoulders, “but you like it. Are they gone now, Lucky?”

“Don’t really know, Krish.”

“Why don’t you do something about it?” Aunty Mina asked as she watched Champa pick up the *gugulas* in the serviette, her legs tangling in the folds of the *lehenga*. “Put it in the garden for the birds. There. Good. You will be blessed with a nice husband.”

“Who needs a nice one as long as he’s rich?” Champa clicked her tongue and the entire backyard fell to silence. No young person ever clicked their tongue to an elderly person, especially not of the female gender and specifically not to Aunty Mina. Thankfully, the elder aunt pretended like nothing had happened.

“Who likes to be alone?” Uncle Lucky muttered as he sipped the tea he had made. “But that’s none of my business.”

“*Eish*, that story made me hungry,” Aunty Rosie’s husband, Tiny, said, looking pointedly at my aunts.

In twenty minutes, some of the savoury snacks had been laid out in deep bowls on the trestle table. I distinctly remember Uncle Tiny making the most of the *puree* and *patha* at the hall but my aunts were never ones to leave a man hungry and, so, the sunflower plates had been heaped up on one corner of the table and the ‘house people’ as those closest to the family were called, started to help themselves to the freshly made offerings.

“Survived, all these years,” Aunty Saroj said as she ran an appreciative finger along the outline of the intersecting petals on the plate.

“*Hare baap re!*” Aunty Rosie exclaimed as she started to heave a variety of savouries on her husband’s plate. “I have one of these plates at home from the last time you tied a parcel for us.”

“Like Tupperware, any plate from this set is returnable, Rosie,” Aunty Saroj cautioned.

“These are the last of Ma’s wedding set. Now, tell me, *bachcha*, is your *baadshah* missing you? Staying with him for so long, you must already feel married. In my day, we were not allowed to leave our parents’ homes until *after* we had married. *Hai*, we were not even



allowed to own homes. If we wanted to touch a boy's hand, we would have to marry him first. And, it had to be all the boy's doing. Times have changed, now we move in first, have a few children and then the wedding. It's like a story told out of sequence."

"But sequence does not always equate order," Champa muttered, nudging me in the ribs and rubbing her tummy.

"Nice to get a preview of the movie before paying full price for the ticket," Uncle Tiny added before his wife shushed him. Not a cow was mentioned.

Married without children, Aunt Saroj had spent holidays and weekends with us. As close family, she was also part of the clean-up crew and would be one of the last people to leave ... if she did leave. No one could make Aunt Saroj do a thing that she was not willing to do, especially not happily. By the flick of a crazy fairy's wand, my aunt had always been angrier than her two siblings since that very first heartbeat. She was mad at the world, mad at herself and mad at herself for being mad at the world while being *in* the world. A woman could tell that she had been disappointed in the world – in all those small things for which we search – marriage, husband, children, white pickets, good baking skills, carpools and Tuesday casseroles. I don't know what it was – I really don't – but life had swept by her door and forgotten to knock. At least she had Uncle Sunny who had had been sent around on errands looking for different items in the house that had been required by the ladies.

"Yes, Charu?"

"Who?"

Blue eyes flashed in front of me before I crashed into reality again. Aunt Saroj said my fiancé's name slowly, as if she had wanted to assure me that I had heard correctly, to assure me that we were talking about the same person. It was bleak assurance, indeed. Bharati's voice shook me out of my daze.

"His initials are here and here." She pointed out the swooping tail and curl of my fiancé's first initial and the rigid back of his last.

"Thank you," I smiled, although I could not see his initials in the pattern at all. It was not a good sign. The game that the bride played with her husband on the wedding night was to find his initials in her *mehndi* pattern. It had acted as a precursor for something more intimate

between two strangers from different villages and a sign of a successful union. Well, so much for that!

“Ghanika, did you eat yet, *bachcha*? Take a plate. Do not eat from the pot because then it will rain on your wedding day,” Aunt Saroj cautioned. “Did anyone see those cachous?”

“Inside,” a chorus arose. It was where everything was to be found.

Uncle Sunny clicked his tongue in response to his wife’s question and left. Food done, everyone followed after him. I lingered. Underneath the last plate was one of my wedding invitations. My name shimmered on it as the gold foil print picked up the flames from the fire under the *hundas*. Against the dark night, it looked like the fireflies had come back. This was the last time my family’s name would follow mine. I, my future, would be contained in another family, their name and their history. I would be swallowed up, lost like the fireflies were to the day and like a lid covered a pot.

Fingerprints were all over the card, oil splatters across my name, the glossy paper having picked up all of the signs of everyday living that were caught by our fingertips. I folded the corners in to the middle, careful not to smudge any more of my *mehndi*, flipped it over and turned the edges upwards before launching it into the unwatched flames of the fire. The coals sparked as the paper jet landed across them. The jet cringed upon itself as if trying to avoid the heat that threatened it. That would not save it. I left it to its fate and entered the house. Pari, Ash’s ‘fairy godmother,’ was in the middle of a story when I stepped into the house.

“...so, and he had to do the ‘honourable’ thing, although there was not a spoon’s worth of honour in the man. In that he was tall, broad-shouldered and intimidating, so he had his pick of the women. These are perils in being young and female.” She looked right at me when she said that. “But I do not think that he ever cared for the particular women he had as long as he had one. There was always more than one, though; a lion with his pride. You know that the king is only king when he has something that others do not, has something that others wanted.”

Pari leant her chin on Ash’s shoulder and they both giggled. She kissed her temple before turning away from my friend. “But that middle part, in that space where we lived and how he made me feel, was magical. Do not doubt that a man in control, a man *aware* of that control, is a not powerful man. His power lies in what you do not have – and I had nothing. Only later did I realise that his power lay in making me *feel* like nothing.”

“What did your family have to say?” Aunty Krish had a pigeon-pair and an entire flock of worries about them.

“My father was an accountant, so his concern was not like the others. No ... it was not about the life that beast could give to me but the type of life his name could lend my father. He dreamt of his name being acquainted with that great savage of a man, but a zero multiplied by zero is still zero. That’s life arithmetic for you.”

Her swallow was audible. The kettle in the kitchen started singing but no one paid any attention to it. Even Ash, who I was certain had heard this story before, was consumed by the tale.

“And in that relation, he sacrificed his daughter and I lost my name forever, my rights along with it.” My ears pricked up at that. “The day that I walked into his house, I felt as if I would never see the light again. Of all the dangers in the world of which my family had cautioned me, I did not know that the thing of which I was most afraid would be *in* my home and calling me ‘wife.’ There is not much difference between a jail and a house if you are not free within its walls. Tigers, perhaps, feel the same at the zoo. But I found myself as that tiger within a cage, the rage building as my every waking thought was filled with death. But it was life I had to choose. Yes, living is a choice. It is one which we make every day and sometimes that is the hardest decision in our hands. Now, my only regret is that so many of my days had been filled with so much longing for death.”

If anyone spared a thought for the *hundas* outside, no one moved to save them.

“If I had been a good Indian girl, I would never have seen him because good girls do not raise their eyes from their laps. Some large monster which had sat docile in me for all the winters of my years lifted its head. I called it a monster simply for it was a thing greater than my control. When he caught me, he smiled at me and the monster stood. From that first afternoon until the last, I felt the monster wrapping scaly fingers around my arms and bruising them.”

I looked at my hands, the broken fingers and the memories covered in *mehndi*.

“The gurus will say that those women are bad women, that they do not deserve families or husbands or care but that is only a man saying that. Only a man can be so intensely cruel. But women have their own pride. Sita sat outside with the rats and the rain. They say the sun did not shine on her for the sun understood her pain because it is alone, too. The sun hides our

pain, the glare of sunlight on metal makes others turn away and they miss the cracks, the aches and the fractures. And women *are* metal, the strongest you can find. A woman does what she must and there is strength in that even if you cannot see it.”

*No one looks at our insides. They have not been taught to do so. Even women have not been trained to see themselves.*

Miri’s words came back to me, chasing Ash’s fairy godmother’s words. The *tisek* scratched at my finger like a dog demanding attention. My head was filled with so many voices that I found it a challenge to hear Pari’s above them all.

I watched as my family and friends continue to shove egg-shaped candy, musk-scented cachous, Jordan almonds, *peda* balls, cellophane-wrapped *gulab jamuns*, tamarind sweets and nut puffs into the lace-embellished boxes after Pari had spoken. They caught up on gossip, teased each other and swore in Hindi. It was only me who seemed moved by her words. Like a stone thrown into the water, all looked calm at the surface but something had changed beneath. Human interaction seemed a strange performance, then; bi-directional strings attached to other strings, each needing to be flexible enough to hold the other strings taut and loose, as required. I was in a vaudeville production, trying to make sense of the scene in front of me, the people around me. Had no one noticed? Had I grown so sad amongst them that they had forgotten that I used to be ... otherwise.

“He needs the exercise.” Aunt Saroj was speaking, as Uncle Sunny was sent – for the umpteenth time – around the house in the pursuit of items misplaced. Her voice was light but her eyes did not lift up from the box she had been completing. “If we could just find those *elachi* sweets, Champa and Ghanika can spoon them into tiny packets and we would not need to revisit these ‘takeaway gifts’ again.”

“They’re called favours,” Champa corrected. “I went to a Christian wedding and they gave us all chocolates in teacups as favours.”

“Too fancy. Must *we* thank *them* for feeding *them*? Are they doing us a favour by attending this wedding?” Aunt Saroj’s eyebrows creased and I could imagine the type of teacher that she had been at school before marriage had called her out of that profession.

I looked at my mother who had pursed her lips together. There were even more wrinkles streaking around them, like lightning but signalling something even worse. Aging. Limits. End.

“Not talking is how they stay together,” Aunty Manilall said. She had been in charge of tying the ribbons on each favour because her fingers were the smallest. She had been our neighbour for as long as I could remember. “Thirty years, show me who could do better.”

“Us,” Uncle Manilall entered, sipping his *chai* from the *hunda* noisily, before smacking his lips to get the dribble of liquid that had leaked out. He had kind eyes with creases at the corner that made them seem a bit sleepy. They were placed high on his face, a mile away from the square set of his jaw. “We are forty years strong with laughter and jokes and her snoring.”

A flying cachou stung him on the ear and he flinched. Aunty Manilall resumed her explanation. “Saroj and Sunny have nothing to say to each other because all of their words were used up about thirty years ago. Sad state for an English teacher.”

“Nanad, no. These are ‘big-people’s stories and not for the girls,” my mother shushed Aunty Manilall. There was a specific rage only women can sense emanating off other women. It was a feeling that built, let out in sighs in the corners of kitchens and taken out on *brinjals* or wedding favours alike.

“I’m twenty-four, ma! I graduated, I work and I have a wedding coming up. I am ‘big people,’ now.” *Tit-tit-titters* arose around me. It would not do for a girl to raise her voice.

“True, the little duckling is old enough to have a duckling of her own now,” Aunt Saroj stepped in, her eye on her work. “Like you did.”

“You really are a pot-stirrer.” Aunty Manilall rolled her eyes at Aunty Saroj.

“It is a mother’s duty to bring her child into this world, to see it safe and to protect it from *any* harm, especially loose tongues.” The flames from the fire outside were no match for the ones in my mother’s eyes. She looked straight at my belly when she spoke. “It is madness having a child today. There is too much danger, too much evil, too many beasts to fight. And, then, there is the fight we have with ourselves. Tell me, Nanad, which women in their right mind would bring a child into all this?”

“You know?” My voice fell. I heard it drop into a ravine of darkness.

“Your doctor had a massive crush on your mother in high school and would tell her everything,” Aunt Saroj started gathering the sharp implements on the table, starting with the ones closest to my mother. “I think he still is a little bit in love with our Madhuri, if you ask me. She knows everyone’s medical stories in Links, from hypertension to hysterectomy.”

“No one asked you,” my mother snapped. Some beast reared up in Madhuri Sharma as well as she flung a dishcloth onto the table. Pari looked taken aback. Ash had her hand on her knee to comfort her. “Children think they have the right to question their mothers on the choices they made in their name, to keep them warm and fed. What would people say if they actually knew the battle women fight, Saroj?”

*What would people say?*

With that, decades of life became ether and vanished. I looked around the table of women and saw that none of them looked at me. Whether by choice or social grace, they were about as useful to me as I was to them in this moment. It had been the same with Uvelemva. They had sent her back to a husband and a life that would have never satisfied her. Ash needed medication and separation in order to heal herself. What would be my tale?

Would my husband and I have nothing to say to each other except the one thing we could not say? Would we joke about each other’s snoring and laugh? Appearances and family values was a dangerous cocktail when mixed with the stark medication of realisation and self-respect.

Frustration fuelled my steps. Crying in front of strangers was easier than crying in front of Indian family members. Firstly, they would never let you live it down. Secondly, it did not matter after that because each generation would inform the one that succeeded it. I walked straight up to my room, savouring the feel of the familiar soft carpets. My fiancé had an aversion to exposed toes and that had resulted in me wearing shoes around the house in which we had lived. Cracking my toes, I relished imagining his horror at this simple act ... and, then, shuddered when I pictured his reaction. I reached into my bag for my phone trying to avoid the edges when I looked up at something that had moved to obscure me. The wedding sari had been strung up on a hanger in front of the mirror. I gasped. From here, it looked as if I was already wearing the dress.

“You can make your father mad but don’t make your mother sad.”

I fumbled and the phone slipped back into the handbag. “Aunt Saroj, have you seen the way my mother is?”

I battled to keep my voice low. A low voice was a sign of respect. There was not a greater compliment than telling Indian parents that their child was respectful.

“Listen, *betee*.” I braved whiplash at the tone in her voice. “This is the story you want to know, the one your mother has protected both you and herself by keeping it a secret. Why not just trust her judgement and her silence? There is no happy ending here.”

“We keep silent on too many things,” I muttered, looking back at the bag that housed the phone.

An interminably long sigh, a raised eyebrow and defeat followed my words. “Fine, then, as your eldest aunt, I overrule her judgements. It is the advantage of being the eldest sibling.”

“I wouldn’t know about that, as well. I’m an only child.”

“Be glad.” Exaggerated exasperation rolled off her tongue. “Siblings are nothing but trouble and work! Ask Cinderella.”

“Those stories are not real. None of them are real. They are just stories made up to quieten the adult that a child would become, to restrict us – bind us – like the Chinese bind their feet ... make us all *smaller*.”

“Stories, *betee*, have everything to do with the way we live our lives,” she looked me dead in the eye as she spoke, that anger levelling off at the surface. “Stories are like people. We meet them, get influenced by them, learn from them and then we live our lives.”

“Life is not a fairy tale,” I contended.

“Although it does make for a good story at times, you must admit,” my aunt battled on. “The worst thing a man can do to a woman is tell her that he loves her. There is no freedom in that love. You can take a plane, *betee*, because there are no magical carpets or wish-granting genies here, to any city that you like but you will never be free because you will be stuck with the thoughts in your head and those are the most powerful chains ever. You need to make your own wishes come true; it is the only wisdom that I can offer to you.”

“But, Aunty Saroj–”

“Now listen ...” She cut me off as she sat on the edge of the bed and looked up at me; for a brief second, I saw the resemblance to my mother. Then, she drew back, hiding everything she had revealed, and she became my aunt once more; distant but familiar. “Your mother married a man who everyone believed was the best man, the ideal man and her Prince Charming. That his name was Ram only cemented their good opinions on that *madhir chod*. Of us three sisters, your mother was the most attractive. She had the biggest smile, although it is hidden behind the years now. She had the loudest laugh, though that is a machine that needs more greasing than there is grease in the world. And, she was strong. There was *nothing* that she could not do. It was why *Chodu* Ram fell for her ... and, also, why he left.”

“I don’t understand. I thought he died.” She patted my knee as she had when I was younger. Her words were the same rhythm a cat uses to slink through an open window and into the house at night.

“It is easier to tell a child that their parent is dead than that he chooses *every* day not to return home. When *Chodu* Ram came home, that first time, it was not with the intention to propose to your mother. Oh, no ... he had another Sharma sister in mind!”

“You?”

“*Chut bola hai*,” and I got a slap on the arm for my question. Horror filled the space of the moment that followed as we looked at the ruined *mehndi*. “NO!”

“Quick! Look into my bag.” Aunt Saroj’s face was already in my handbag before she knew what she was to find. “There’s a pen–”

“It’s a BIC!” The red pen was swung in the air like a trophy. “Now what?”

“I can’t do anything!” I raised my hands to her face, the strict instructions of the *mehndi* artist falling between us. “Try and remake the pattern. Quickly!”

“I can’t draw!” Panic increased in her voice.

“*Shhh!*” My eyes swung to the door but the hoard of aunties that I had expected to see were not there. “Just follow the lines with the pointy end.”

“Oh, sounds easy when you say it but what if–”



“This is how they did it in the old days, Aunt Saroj!”

Aunt Saroj used every swear word my granny had taught her whilst she tidied up the swirls and the spots. When she was done, we both burst out laughing until we cried. The years fell away with each tear and I saw my mother in her, again. With a stab to the heart, I knew this woman would disappear the moment this conversation was over. When she returned to her husband, to the world she occupied with him in it, a veil would fall and her anger would return. The idea of it all was incomprehensible. A bride wears a veil to cover her face on her wedding day. A wife wears it all through her marriage to cover herself every day. It must be an exhausting way of life.

“I think we removed his initials,” I mused, squinting at my hand.

“Really?” She raised an eyebrow then shook it down. “He is a *chhutiya*. Just point to the peacock and tell him that it is in the tail.”

“Did you ...”

“Yes. So did every bride,” she snorted before raising her eyebrow at me. “A man will believe his own self-importance. For all Rama’s good qualities, Sita suffered at the foot of his reputation. And you have changed, *betee*. You have become sadder.”

“It’s my wedding ... I’m supposed to look this way,” I shrugged. “The aunties told me.”

“No, you look like Janiki did.” She swallowed. “I do not know when it happened but you have shut down.”

“Aunty Janiki?”

The air in the room thickened and cemented around us.

“Ma used to say that every pot has a lid ... but Jani was in the wrong kitchen. We did not know that at first.”

“*Chodu* Ram ...” It all fitted now. She was the third Sharma sister.

“Yes. We believed it so sweet to have a Ram and Sita in the family. We would tease Jani every day.” A smile drawn wide in only the way memories could, made her years younger.

“But, when he came home, he saw Madhuri and that was that.”

“I want to know what happened after *that*.” I felt small saying it. No one wondered what happened after a fairy tale ended but I knew that the ‘happily ever afters’ were not the complete story.

“Jani knew a losing battle when she saw it. It was why she had been so well-behaved growing up – no fights, no tantrums and no arguments. The best of us when it came to the long-term stuff, truly. Spotless, like her namesake.” Her mouth turned downwards but she squeezed it straight and pulled herself together. “She found someone else, of course. The tradition was always to marry and live in the family home but, whilst the two sisters had resolved their differences over *Chodu* Ram, society had not. People talk. So, Jani and her new Ram moved away. Fourteen years ... I missed my sister for fourteen years. The elders say that when a daughter marries into a new home, she is now the daughter of that family, that she must put that family first. It was just another way to explain her exile. We all knew it. When she returned home, there were rumours of affairs that followed her back here. She was pregnant with the twins at that time, Mahadev and Vishnu, and used them as the reason for her return. The *godh barai* turned into the *chhathi pooja* and that turned into life. She kept her separation from her husband a secret from all of us.”

“Just like Sita.” I looked at my aunt for confirmation. “A twice-exiled woman, separated from the life she knew by her husband and who suffered because of his decisions.”

“Ma used to say that Jani was the quiet one but you see a person in a whole new light when you know what they are feeling and that’s purely because that is the only time when they are stripped down; bare and honest. Only a woman can hear another woman’s pain, can feel the disgrace of her return so keenly. I was young, then, but the world turns at its own speed outside of the cities. I listened from the other side of her bedroom door every night until I could not anymore. The sound of her voice echoed of the years. Yes, only a woman can hear another woman’s pain. And her pain spoke of her children. You see, a woman does not always want a child for a man. A need, *betee*, to not feel alone in the world, to have something that tethers you to it, is stronger than the tie that binds a woman to her husband.”

I stabbed the drying flecks of *mehndi* with a fingernail. My hands had begun to sting, a thousand tiny spiders with electrified legs scuttling up to my forearms. I kept my hands still, though, because all Indian girls knew better than to scratch it. We were taught to live with the toe-stretching frustration of the dreaded *mehndi* itch than to seek relief ... and that was just the start of it.

“It was a Tuesday morning when she took her life. An auspicious day for us but there was nothing else lucky or special about it; that date or the reason. Her body was still warm when we found her ...” She clicked her tongue. “It was only afterwards that rumours circulated – even more rumours, that is. Madhuri never cared about such things because she just never had to worry about them. Everything came easier for her because she was the youngest. Still, she had to wait until both her elder sisters were married until she could marry *Chodu* Ram.”

Puzzle pieces of the greater mystery began to slot into place. I wanted to ask questions but feared that there would never be a moment like this again. Instead, I did what all good Indian girls do ... I listened.

“Our guru told our mother to wait, that her daughters should get married in their thirties or bad luck would fall on them. Your mother cried every night but she had to wait her turn. *Chodu* Ram even came by one night and took her away. That’s how you came into the picture, *betee*, and how they ended up married.” We grunted in unison. “He was rich and everything was found. She never questioned him on his wealth until she visited us, again. We threw so many questions at her that forced her into the realisation that her husband was invisible to her. Spurred on by the lust of unknown answers, she started digging through his papers at night while he was asleep. She should have waited until he was out of the house.”

The itch was going to make my brain bleed, I was certain of this fact. “His mother was an airplane parent. She was the pie in the sky.”

I smiled, despite myself. “A helicopter parent, Aunty Saroj, and I think you mean the ‘eye in the sky,’ perhaps?”

“Yes, *betee*, she was all these things. Every Shah Rukh Khan movie that you have ever watched about mother-in-laws being awful to their daughter-in-laws was fulfilled in the way Veena treated your mother. Jealousy would be the easy answer but I think it was more than that. She had been so accustomed to have been the only woman in that family that she did not know how to act around or deal with new blood. It was the first time for her, as well, to be someone’s mother-in-law. *Hai* Ram, she only had the one son.

“Fear makes a small man even smaller. Money shrinks these small men to the size of ants.” Her mouth twisted into a screw. “He wanted to make her fearful of a life without him, without his money, but your mother dusted herself off that night and walked away. Her

mother-in-law, though, she came at her with everything that she had. It was the embarrassment of it all. She had not wanted to be outdone by this young girl.”

A finger to my cheek; affection in the old ways, signalled a turn in my aunt’s thoughts. “They say a daughter brings *luxmi* into the house. When she marries, she carries that home’s *luxmi* with her. If her new husband is good to her, he will prosper. If not, then he does not.”

“Happy wife, happy life?” I asked, looking at the *mehndi* on my arm. The *mehndi* swirled, much like the streetlights had that one time, and I blinked away the hallucination. “If I have a daughter and she asks me how to pray one day, what should I do?”

“I was not blessed with children but, “she looked at me oddly, “I would have taken her by the hand and prayed with her.”

“How would you know that it’s right?” I pursued the point.

“If it is sincere and hopeful, then it is right.” Her answer was so quiet, and spoken to the window. “We are the sum total of our lived lives, Charu. Every option, choice and decision we have – or make – is a reflection of that life.”

“Sometimes, that reflection is murky,” I mumbled.

“Prayer is simple, *betee*, belief is hard.” She looked right at me when she said that, then, sighed heavily and shook her head. “Your mother was lonely in the years that followed but she was not alone. We are women, yes. We are taught what we should do, yes. Sweetmeats with ghee, *titha* curry with *gharam* masala, pots washed with loamy soil, *chai* with boiled milk, legs crossed at the ankles, hair tied during *pitar pakh*, oil-bath for Diwali, milk for Surya, *roth* for Hanuman and not to cut that first jackfruit but no one tells us how to talk to a woman after her husband has gone. If it is through cheating, then it is the woman’s fault because she could not keep him happy. If it is through divorce, then it is the woman’s fault because she was not a good wife. If it is through death, then it is the woman’s fault because she was unlucky. You are a woman, so is Madhuri, so am I. Yet, we have never talked to each other as women.”

My back straightened and a frisson of anticipation followed.

“I do not talk as a wife would to Sunny but I will not leave him. It is not for love. Love was never in the early days of our marriage or these later ones. It was not even a casual visitor. Its

absence was never felt because its acquaintance was never made.” She flattened her mouth, plump lips disappearing in the unhappy truth that she had to share. “I did not love my husband but I did choose him. Who can love a man who owns a farm over a man who owns the world? But there is a freedom in choice as there is not in love.”

She wrung her hands, the action so different from the *veda*-smacking aunt I knew. “There was another, an unsuitable suitor, a *gorah*. Imagine the scandal in apartheid South Africa, Charu, an Indian girl with a white boy! Tongues would have wagged from morning to coffin! Chacha Bhai would have taken out his belt for us and landed himself in the *tronk*!”

It was hard to hold back the snort of affection for the youngest of the Sharmas. Chacha Bhai, also not his real name, had been short in height, in temper and in time. Although I had only two photographs with which to remember him, the family had stacks of memories of Grandfather Sharma.

“I could not choose Hendrik in the face of my family or the neighbours. But, I have him tattooed under the skin of my eyes and there are nights I will myself to an early sleep for that tattoo and other nights I dare not sleep for fear of that tattoo. Every morning I put on a face and go out into the world. I meet other faces and I exist in that world as best I can. Sometimes, the day betrays the person we were in the morning. Sometimes, we forget to take off our face.”

The *mehndi* itched. It was almost too much to bear.

“I could not sacrifice everything we – the family – had built for Hendrik. I would have married him with both eyes open and my heart in my mouth but no one would have stood beside me or him.” She looked over my head, into the dark clouds in the darker sky, and nodded to something out there. “When I said goodbye to him, I said goodbye to a part of myself, as well. A part of me is out there, a part that knows that it belongs somewhere else; a wraith. All you see before you are responsibility and duty, but those two things are not all that makes a woman. Sunny does not know because he cannot comprehend it. It is only a woman who can tell a woman what she has lost. Men *are* tremendously ignorant when it comes to these things.”

The *mehndi* had begun to flake. It fell at my feet like dead fleas. I flexed my fingers and a hundred more flecks sat upon the floor.

“Your *baadshah* sounds great – on paper. But, the thing about paper is that, unless you draw on it with bright vivid colours, paper is boring.” She looked out of that window when she spoke next. “I broke my own heart yet it was mine to break. But what could my heart have given me back then? Our parents, our family, sometimes the entire community, try to wrap us in tissue paper and keep its daughters safe – to have a baby without knowing about sex, to having a husband without knowing his skin.”

“*Didi*, one day women will stop blaming themselves for the actions of men. Let today be that day for us.” My mother entered the room with a package wrapped in red cloth. Aunty Saroj and I both bristled at the intrusion. Madhuri had not removed her sari since the *mehndi* and I noticed how specifically equal each fold was now that she did not have the table to sit behind. “It is a curious thing seeing you, Charu, like this. It is like having two sets of eyes. One pair is set in the past, seeing you as a child, and the other pair is in the present, seeing you as this fully grown adult. For me, it is as if you are playing ‘dress-up.’ It is not real, not at all.”

I looked at my mother. Her words had been squeezed through her throat as if someone had wrapped their hands around her neck. “It’s not enough.”

“Not enough?” She echoed my words, confusion changing them. Slow dawn broke across her brow. “I think you misunderstood me. That is not what I want for you. I want you to live. I want you to have a bunch of good years filled with whatever makes a life full for you. I didn’t want you to get hurt. And the more you turned out like me, the more I worried.”

“You were listening at the door!” Aunty Saroj raised her hands to the ceiling. “My sister, the spy!”

“Of course, that is how young Indian girls find out all the family secrets.” They shared a grin between them.

“I broke ma’s heart, too.” My mother made a beeline for the edge of the bed upon which her sister sat and folded her hands over the wrapped package. “You remember how we fought back then? I would want something, Ma would not, she would shout and I would sulk?”

“You should have sulked longer,” Aunty Saroj said, jabbing her in the side with her elbow.

“She should have shouted louder,” my mother replied, smoothing invisible strands of hair back into its bun.

“*Hai*, Ma only let you back in the house after the divorce because you had *her* prayer *lota* and she had wanted it back. She always liked a complete set.”

“She hated him, remember? When she saw the copper *lotas* he had bought, she knew him not to be a good man. But she let me be my own fool.”

They laughed, reaching out for each other. Entwined were their hands, their hearts, their memories over the red package.

“You can make your father mad but don’t make your mother sad,” they said in unison.

I noticed my hands, lonely as they were, had reached out for each other, mimicking the sisters. The *mehndi* had dragged into itself. The drier parts came off cleanly to reveal just a light orange tinge on the skin. An omen. The elders would say that marriage was only as strong as the bride’s *mehndi*. If the pattern was dark and vibrant then the marriage was strong and would hold as the *mehndi* had to the bride’s skin. If the colour was light and washed away, then the marriage would fade, too, quickly. Of course, the bride would be blamed for this even though the henna would be gifted from the groom’s family and, whilst the groom also had a bit of *mehndi*, he was not held accountable to the reading of the colour. There would be *nowhere* to hide for the bride because the young lady would not be allowed to leave her home after the *mehndi* was applied.

“For you,” my mother said, her voice breaking me out of my thoughts. “They call this the *Ramayana*, Rama’s tale, but it is also Sita’s freedom.”

I took the red-wrapped package and opened the folds gingerly as the sisters returned to their memories. Sita’s freedom ...

I put the book down on my nightstand and grabbed my phone from my handbag. No longer wary of spoiling the *mehndi*, I reached for it and hit the unlock button at the same time. There were dozens of his messages; they had started off simply, sweetly, obeying the rules of punctuation and flowering with love. Then, they got longer, more frequent. By the time I reached the bathroom, they were vines that needed cutting; lengthy, with the entire screen filled with obscenities and threats, all lacking punctuation. A few of his messages hit home hard. They screamed at me and I felt the muscles in my thighs tense at the expletives that followed were varied and descriptive, although he had not ever been a fanciful linguist.

I had – formerly – believed numerous messages to have been signs of his devotion to me, now I knew that they were a sign of his control. I would spring to answer those texts or his call, feel awful when I had missed even one and made guilty when more than a few had gone unanswered. That he knew I would answer, he knew that he had control over my actions. He had wanted me at my phone, had wanted me focused on him, had wanted to know what I was doing and feeling every hour of the day. When he could, he would influence those actions and those feelings. Would he want that control over every aspect of our marriage? Could I give him that – did I want to?

I looked around at the subway-tiled bathroom. There was more freedom in this room than in the rest of my life. My eyes caught themselves in the mirror. I did not want anyone to see me. I could see myself.

*No else would have you.*

My spine locked into place. Even if there had been someone else, my choice would have remained the same.

*You are nothing.*

It was between him and me.

*The only thing you had worth anything, I took from you.*

*Wathint' abafazi, wathint' imbokodo.*

*I am washing my hands of everything.* I texted a second before I reached for the soap. The pun would be lost on him but my life would not be. Tomorrow was a chance to start again. Tomorrow I would raise the child snug in my belly with new fairy tales. I would create for her the story of Sita anew. Whether that child chose to be a girl or a boy, I did not mind but I hoped that I would be blessed with a daughter so that I may tell her the stories that only women know.

Another beep.

*Tomorrow? Your choice ~ B. East.*

Yes, it was. Finally.



# When Sita Met Belle: An Indian Woman Finds Her Voice Through Re-visioning Fairy Tales

## Introduction

The dissertation comprises of a creative component and a reflection paper. The creative component is a novella titled “When Sita Met Belle.” The novella engages with the *Beauty and the Beast* narrative written from an Indian woman’s perspective and set in a South African context. It draws upon the experiences of Sita from Tulsidasa’s *Sri Ramacharitamanasa* and Belle from Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve’s *La Belle et la Bête*, or *Beauty and the Beast*. The background to this project was that I saw Belle and Sita as alike in their voiceless qualities and experiences from an early age but I was not allowed to question their lack of authority, the stripping of their agency and their submission to men as authority figures. I invest my secondary female characters with these characteristics in order to motivate my protagonist to break the stereotype. In doing so, each chapter is based on a different strand of the *Beauty and the Beast* narrative. The incorporation of epigraphs from the *Sri Ramacharitamanas* create the overarching mood of Sita’s experiences in the creative component and connect with the Indian context of the piece.

The reflection paper discusses the re-visioning of the *Beauty and the Beast* fairy tale from a modern feminist point of view incorporating elements from *Sri Ramacharitamanasa*. This is motivated by previous re-visions of fairy tales from a feminist angle with a focus on the *Beauty and the Beast* narrative. Adrienne Rich’s definition of a ‘re-vision’ is included as it is the stimulus for the novella. In addition, I explore the contributions by Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter as writers who have influenced this re-vision. Furthermore, this reflection paper considers the contextualisation of the *Beauty and the Beast* narrative in contemporary times, the depiction of Sita and Belle in their relative stories, a brief discussion on the Disney treatment of fairy tales, my choices of re-visioning made in the re-novella, a summary of the necessity of re-visioning fairy tales, the idea of passivity invested in the standard female character and my reasons for using textual analysis in my project. There are connected pieces that I, as a child, picked up on but could not

explain. The words came to me when I engaged in feminist writing and was able to comprehend what the andro-centric literature had been conveying.

My intention is to take the story that a large portion of society knows and re-vision it to not just subvert the male gaze but to utilise female agency through two stories that deprive women of their agencies. The first story is the fairy tale *Beauty and the Beast* and the second is *Sri Ramacharitamanasa*. The female protagonists are Belle and Sita, respectively. These characters are presented as feisty and kind, powerful in their own rights, but only as I grew older did it strike me how much of their agency had been denied in their respective stories. As a young Indian woman, these two tales were the most pervasive hence the reason for my choice of texts. The writers that influenced this re-vision are Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter as they have also re-visited female agency in fairy tales. Thus, I begin with defining the fairy tale genre, defining the re-vision process and its necessity in feminist writing, the contributions of both Atwood and Carter as it applies to the fairy tale, the lack of female agency and proliferation of the passive female stereotype and briefly touch upon the Disneyfication of the *Beauty and the Beast* narrative. The methodological approach of this dissertation is textual analysis because it is able to collect experiential information, influences and identify how meaning is established.

Both stories are constantly being updated and brought into the public sphere for consumption; stories being the primary transmitters of information that is generational and meaning-making. This contributes to the popularity of stories as source materials for writers, playwrights, poets, directors and composers. There is a history that accompanies both fairy tales and *Sri Ramacharitamanasa* upon which updates and retellings can build. However, neither story was sufficient for me. So began the idea for this project as a re-visioning of the *Beauty and the Beast* as a story that I would tell my children. This meant that I would have to be comfortable with the narrative that was being expressed. Aside from the usual fairy tales, the other source of stories that had informed my childhood was the Hindu *Sri Ramacharitamanasa*. I began to see links between the two and areas for concern as an Indian woman. For me, there were differences between tradition, culture and captivity that had been blurred in the stories that I had been told. A true representation for the modern Indian woman was lacking. My idea is to re-vision and

speak anew the complex situations that I had envisioned. It is not just re-imagining but speaking through a character to voice a source of distress. I decided to rework the different versions of the *Beauty and the Beast* narrative and have selected versions told by different characters in each chapter, interweaving them into the commonality of challenges faced by women in contemporary society, with the idea of giving these characters the chance to speak to the modern woman.

There has been a plethora of retellings, rewritings and redone fairy tales. In order to focus on what I wanted to achieve, I had to sift through what I did not want to do within the scope of the project. I knew that I did not want to present a fractured fairy tale which, according to Leslee Farrish Kuykendall and Brian Sturm, is a rewriting of the classical fairy tale with a reversal of gender roles (2007:40). It is, also, to be different from contamination which is defined by folklorists as the “foreign influence on pure narrative tradition” (Kuykendall and Sturm, 2007:39). Jack Zipes (2001:102) contends that modern contamination of the fairy tale genre would entail writing new tales that develop the genre into that which is “new and genuine in its own right.” However, my intention is to take a well-known tale and consider the different aspects presented by situating it in a contemporary context. It would not be a foreign influence but would at once be familiar and unfamiliar. The effect of this is, then, to introduce a reader to a new perspective, new glasses for old themes that would highlight the negative facets of the stories we have all been told. These new glasses would see the stories of women anew. I endeavoured to break free of fairy tale notions and constrictions for my gender and present a female character struggling, searching and freeing herself. Hence, I decided on using the approach of a re-vision of on encouraging female agency lacking in the protagonists of Belle and Sita. Of the two genders, only one can truly encapsulate and convey the female experience in a creative and positive expression. The fairy tale of *Beauty and the Beast* and the Hindu text of *Sri Ramacharitamansa* enjoy the fact that both are quite adaptable to the times and never out of favour.

### **A Rich Re-visioning**

Adrienne Rich (1972:18) calls a ‘re-vision’ the “act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction.” As a re-vision,

“When Sita Met Belle,” the novella, looks through a woman’s eyes as she searches for her identity and examines the layers of patriarchy and marginalisation from a modern woman’s perspective. This search is a part of what Rich argues is a woman’s “refusal of the self-destructiveness of a male-dominated society” (1972:18). I am drawn to this idea because such a re-vision would speak to the ‘now,’ of a young Indian woman contemplating her life choices in the days before her wedding which is usually the climax and reward of many fairy tales. It is to look at these aspects of life with a changed perspective, acknowledging the language that surrounded them as chains and the ideas as cages. An awareness of these restrictions would allow us, women in particular, to see with these ‘fresh eyes’ and live afresh (Rich, 1972:18).

The necessity that lies in re-visioning these characters is of delving into their psychological pressures and their societal influences in order to better understand the choices that are presented to them as well as the persuasions and fears that have acted upon them in a feminist re-visioning. Rich (1972:18-19) views a feminist re-vision as survival and as a change in sexual identity. The chains that bind the feminine to femininity are hewn from the links in fairy tales forged in the realm of patriarchy and gender conformity. Zipes (2012:2-3) comments on the social and cultural history of fairy tales, discussing how these fairy tales have evolved but are still able to communicate important information to people to help them in adapting to their environment.

Re-visioning faces backlash because of years of familiarity with gender coding in the fairy tales. These codes are now perceived as naturalised elements that are accepted without question, when they should serve as warnings by making one uncomfortable with the messages contained therein but this is, ultimately, what fairy tales are about. They convey deeply ingrained fears, desires, histories and hopes culturally understood by a specific group. The outlet for these feelings is storytelling. Zipes (1982:2) states that the fairy tale arises from a particular socio-historic period, thus it is reflective of a specific time and audience. This means that the fairy tale is adapting and evolving, which validates my interest in re-visioning the Belle and Sita characters in the twenty-first century; of using these characters as outlets for female fatigue and of a lack of identification. As Rich (1972:25) argues, “the victimization

and the anger experienced by women are real, and have real sources, everywhere in the environment, built into society,” yet what are needed are also literary depictions. The intention behind this is to highlight that ‘once upon a time’ is not in the past and ‘happily ever after’ does not guarantee a future. Therefore, “When Sita Met Belle” retains elements that define it as an overarching fairy tale but one which then takes a reader into a more familiar and identifiable scenario including apartments, airport staff and the backyard, instead of a castle and fairy godmothers.

Through this project, there has been the chance to speak *up* and to expose the pressures of gender roles, female submission and cultural expectations as well as the fears of sexual identity and freedom, masculine domination and marginalisation. The characters whom my protagonist, Charu Sharma, meets divulge the emotional and psychological harms in not being able to be in control of one’s own life, and importance is found in the experiences of these secondary characters as they are more realistic than the fantastic nature of a fairy tale would otherwise allow. In this way, a re-vision changes the way a fairy tale is viewed and understood, the meanings it draws from and provides to the world. The longevity of these age-old tales speaks to their popularity and staying power, yet an update for the present age is needed.

As such any re-vision is a critique of the past that also takes cognisance of its influence. Rich (1972:18) calls for a “radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, [that] would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, [and] how our language has trapped as well as liberated us.” This speaks to the language that I use to discuss the characterisations of Belle and Sita, as well as in writing my protagonist, Charu. In addition, feminist theory is involved in engaging with the social and gender relationships in which meaning is made and is formed. The project speaks to a realisation and awareness of strictures of women without certain freedoms from the perspective of the Belle and Sita characters. It considers the plight of these characters whilst addressing their marginalisation and submissive behaviours in their respective stories. In doing so, the patriarchal mechanisms at work in the texts are highlighted and compared from fairy tale to the *Sri Ramacharitamanas*, discussing

how they are reflected in Indian culture and society in a slice of town life in a sector of South Africa.

When Arundhati Roy (1997:45) wrote that a married daughter did not have a position or place in her parents' home but a divorced daughter did not have a place anywhere at all, it struck a chord with me. In my later years, I have come to realise the determination, strength of character and sheer stubbornness that it took for women in such situations to succeed, often at odds with the religious and cultural aspects of their upbringing. Whilst *Sri Ramacharitamansa* maintains its importance in cultural, religious and social spheres, I have noticed that rather than exploring the nuances of character, there is an emphasis on maintaining stock characters, whilst still detailing and curtailing behaviours in accordance with the examples as perceived to have been presented in the epic. A similar argument can be made for fairy tales, especially with the fairy tales written by the Brothers Grimm being altered in the Disney treatment in film and merchandising. The intention with the latter is to target the children's market which necessitates the removal of the darker and more accurate depictions of growing up. The Disney effect has been so well handled and far reaching that people, certainly including my case, refer to their versions of the fairy tales instead of their predecessors'.

A re-visioning of the *Beauty and the Beast* fairy tale speaks to the present times and South African audience. Rama's story has always been held as a shining example of following one's *dharma*<sup>1</sup> and morality, even more so as it has been supported by the character of Sita. Yet the question of Sita and her story still remains. Sita is presented as the marginalised woman. Fairy tales, also, have messages of masculine power within them, of the male figure being dominant, of a woman waiting for rescue and of that rescue arriving in the form of a man, a husband. A child is often exposed to fairy tales with encoded cultural and gender norms inherent within the text. The child, then, internalises these messages, carrying them into adulthood. A re-vision breaks these messages; female characters gain autonomy, voicing their predicaments and disillusionment but, also, highlight their sources of inner strength and empowerment.

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<sup>1</sup> This is the principle of order in the universe.

For my re-visioning of the *Beauty and the Beast* fairy tale, I had to reconsider many aspects of storytelling, not discounting the feminist rewritings from the 1970s onwards that had grown out of the gender-political climate that influenced revisiting popular narratives. These included not only reconsidering the content and message but, also, the style of my writing. In addition, I had to be cognisant of previous writers in this genre and their pursuits towards this end. Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood and Jack Zipes were literary giants in this genre and helped in bringing fairy tales to the modern age.

Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood have both re-visioned the traditional fairy tales by using feminist theory. *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault* (2009 [1922]) influenced Carter's collection of short fiction titled *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) whilst Atwood's collection of short stories titled *Bluebeard's Egg* (1983) have been significant in feminist rewriting. In Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986), the notion of the submissive woman, who best serves in a subordinate and domestic role, is further continued. These notions exist in the characters of Belle and Sita but are heightened in the dystopian Atwoodian world.

One of the reasons as to why Carter and Atwood use re-visions is to destroy those patriarchal myths falsely representing the female condition and experience (Koshy, 2010: 93). Feminist critiques of fairy tales show that the patriarchal values coded into a story serve to convey and convince women to conform to the conventional and restrictive gender roles. Belle is the caring and domestic character whilst Sita is dutiful and obedient to Rama. Neither is rebellious in ways that would challenge their respective male partner's authority nor in ways that would grate on the female mindset now and inspire a hashtag movement on Twitter. Neither refuse victimisation. Neither assert themselves or reinvent their identities in any manner that detracts from the male authority in their lives. Marcia Lieberman states that an almost innumerable number of women would certainly have developed their "psycho-sexual self-concepts and their ideas of what they could or could not accomplish, what sort of behaviour would be rewarded, and of the nature of the reward itself, in part from their favourite fairy tales" (1972:9).

This beginning had to do with first, deconstruction, and then construction. Susan Sellers sees deconstruction as exposing harmful stories and construction as cultivating beginnings and endings alternative to the stories that we know (Sellers quoted in Koshy, 2010:78). These forms of cultivation should be more aligned to the circumstances of the audiences in order for it to be more attractive to the audience. Furthermore, Sellers states that this format should offer a new perspective and opportunities for reflection (quoted in Koshy, 2010:79). A re-vision would offer a familiar story in an unfamiliar way. The impact of such unfamiliarity would then be to reveal both positive and negative aspects of the tale otherwise taken for granted and therefore developed in the psyche or subconscious.

Rewriting and re-visioning a fairy tale aligned to feminist freedoms and a contemporary audience entailed a struggle for me to overcome years of conditioning by 'unhearing' and 'unknowing' the stories to which I had been accustomed since childhood. Ironically, it was from the women in my family that I had heard these tales. Those very same women – aunts, grandmothers and mothers – held the ideal of Sita above all else, yet both stories yielded women without authority, without agency and without male support. The question, as I grew older, revolved around what type of stories I would tell my children, especially a daughter. Charu echoes this sentiment when she thinks to herself at her bathroom mirror, "I would raise the child snug in my belly with new fairy tales. I would create for her the story of Sita anew" (Chundhur, 2019:85).

The idea of creation is Godly and it is womanly. In religious teachings, we are told that God created man and, biologically, women create other human beings. It is not too far a stretch to equate women as divine then and writers as recorders of this knowledge. If writers and women have this amount of power, the question must be posed as to why this power has not been exercised as vociferously as possible. The actual literary value of a fairy tale is in its boundless potential for interpretation (Koshy, 2010:32). Thus, in creating the story of Sita "anew" I could interpret the story as I wished a story would be. I was certain of this re-visioning as Friedrich Nietzsche stated that there were no facts, just interpretations (quoted in Barry, 2009:61). If our stories were open to interpretation, re-interpretation, newness and re-visioning, then



meaning is not specifically ascribed<sup>2</sup> and can be used to describe the experience of women encapsulated by a woman.

Feminist critic, Diana Purkiss, spoke about three ways of rewriting in poetry that are applicable to re-visioning. She identified shifting the male focus to a female focus, turning a minor character into the narrator and recreating those traditionally negative connotations and terms into positive ones (quoted in Koshy, 2010:77-78). These aspects are covered in "When Sita Met Belle" as the protagonist is female and looks at the experiences of women, each chapter except for the last one is told from the point of view of a secondary character and Charu breaks out of her restrictive notions to see what is a traditionally taboo situation as liberation for her daughter.

### **Passivity**

Being a woman does not discount one from having traditional male experiences but writers have stayed away from penning such characters. This example is developed in Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" as the protagonist's mother is able to act like the typical male hero by wielding a revolver and saving her daughter's life. In this way, Carter is able to negate this gender-based passivity and relay to her audience that gender is not restrictive, it is only the writing of gender that is restricted. In analysing gender in the production and reception of texts, Professor Anne Cranny-Francis states that the purpose of feminist fiction is to tear at the seams of writing to show how thoroughly sexism is stitched into the textual fabric of literature (quoted in Koshy, 2010:151). Therefore, the limits of the feminine is written but the full capabilities of women are left unexplored.

Traditional fairy tales relay to children that women rewarded with love if they are submissive, passive, self-sacrificing and patient. These characteristics are one that do not pose a threat to the male gender in aggression, domination or leadership roles. Active ability and voiced opinions are deserving of punishment for female characters which leaves them in the only state available to them, which is falling in line with patriarchal power (Dworkin in Joosen, 2004:6). The Walt Disney Company,

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<sup>2</sup> Meaning is fluid and this fluidity allows for interpretation and invention.

which is responsible for the propagation and standardisation of the fairy tale form that we now know, has recently started a trend that moves away from the passive female characters and, in many ways, the current adaptations of fairy tales are feminist revisions.

Situating Sita in the current century proves problematic as many hold the cultural and religious beliefs that Rama and Sita are divine, yet the character of Sita can be used to question the narratives that expound and enforce the chastity of women. Sita should have a voice and protest against Rama's reasons for not accepting her after her captivity. In fact, this lack of faith that Rama exhibits can prove Rama as insecure and Ravana, the villain, as more truly exhibiting love and being a better husbandly option for Sita. The question of which character is the actual 'Beast' is raised and echoed in Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993), which is a retelling of *Bluebeard*. In both the play and the film, the husband is presented as the poorer option and rejected.

Of particular interest is Zipes's (2012:6) understanding of stories as having the power to determine and influence social practices. Behaviours, reactions, gender roles and morals can, thus, be set as an agenda through a fairy tale. Maria Tatar (2010: 55) examines the history of fairy tales that have made a powerful comeback in the United States after Bruno Bettelheim published *The Uses of Enchantment* in 1976. Bettelheim endorsed fairy tales for their therapeutic value for children; yet Tatar was left to wonder in the years that followed Bettelheim's publication whether fairy tales still mattered. Betsy Hearne (1989:iv) analyses different retellings of the *Beauty and the Beast* thread, but regards her work more a "study of the art and artifice of a story rather than an analysis of its meaning." If we consider that meaning is not made in isolation, then a text can highlight social, economic, historic, cultural and geographical concerns and shifts of a certain population, community or area. Thus, a consideration of this endeavour will be on how language portrays women and how this language impacts on the 'felt effect' of experiences upon a section of Indian women who look to stories and characters for role models and modes of being, as well as literary theory. It will also consider the marginalisation of the female characters of Sita and Belle in the texts, the roles that they play in relation to their

male counterparts and the impact of the continuation of these experiences of isolation, passivity and marginalisation.

Atwood and Carter access their re-visions of the fairy tale by using a feminist approach that allows for the highlighting of stereotyping along the lines of traditional gender roles and presenting new endings for the stories that unfurls the genre for notions of women empowerment. Yet power is one major aspect that these female characters lack and fairy tales are about power (Zipes quoted in Wilson, 1993:33). Power bequeaths agency and the lack of both leaves a female character at the mercy of a male counterpart's intentions. Like Belle in the Beast's castle and Sita outside Ravana's palace, so, too, does Charu find herself outside of her mother's house, removed from her wedding plans and in the company of women who detail the destructive male intentions in their lives and their struggles to combat oppression and rebuild agency. Charu's fiancé, himself, is a sinister phantom lurking around the edges of her freedoms and encroaching even further upon her as the wedding approaches. From a strictly patriarchal viewpoint, man appears in literature "as, if not a dream, a fascination and a terror; and that the source of the fascination and the terror is, simply, Man's power-to dominate, tyrannize, choose, or reject the woman" (Rich, 1972:19). What has drawn me to the feminist re-vision of the classic fairy tale is the potential to voice each experience and to imaginatively liberate a person.

Fairy tales have their own history and popularity but if a story does not change, then there is little hope in the message and strictures changing. Amber Sparks (2017) states that traditional fairy tales served the purpose of presenting a warning for women of the future in the world outside of their parents' homes. The warning still has value but it needs to get the attention of the audience. This is vital for the continuing survival of the genre. One way to do this is by appropriation, which is how the fairy tale evolved, by taking aspects and elements from folklore and adapting them to the audience. In such a way, the *Beauty and the Beast* narrative was revived in the *Twilight* (Meyer, 2008) saga, which also inspired the *Fifty Shades* (James, 2011) series.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the journey from childhood to adolescence to

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<sup>3</sup> These adaptations include *The Twilight Saga*, films beginning in 2008 which were based on the *Twilight* books by Stephenie Meyer.

adulthood is met at every point by the same story. This speaks to the popularity and adaptive capacity of fairy tales, including the re-visions that can occur.

Gender notions, stereotypes, masculine domination, patriarchy, female submission and marginalisation are encoded into literature. From the language used, the reaction of female characters to their male counterparts as well as to the experiences in which they find themselves, children learn how to engage in the world from stories. These children grow into adults and still function in the world based on these faulty premises, most unquestioning or paying heed to their unconsciously unsettled psyche as a result. Language portrays stereotypes. It defines women, feminine psychology, in relation to the 'felt effect' of experiences upon women and literary theory. Thus, the marginalisation of the female characters in the texts, the roles that they play in relation to their male counterparts and the impact of the continuation of these phenomena, are also seen from the language used.

Fairy tales need to be re-visioned for current and successive generations because our communities, societies and ways of life have changed since that first *Beauty and the Beast* tale was spun. Therefore, any further adaptations should reflect these changes. As the reader engages with the text, the meaning that they infer from this engagement is a part of their lived experiences and influences. Some may feel psychologically unsettled by a passive Belle or a waiting Sita if they have been raised in a progressive thinking household whilst others may accept voiceless female characters as a part of the everyday. The problem would be a lack of questioning and of interrogation of the text from language use to the reactions of characters. A feminist re-vision of any fairy tale can be liberating, giving the different variants of the female experience a platform or being its mouthpiece. In contrast, the consequence of enforcing the mindset of a helpless female victim through the continuation of the trope in a fairy tale is tantamount to the suppression of womankind.

Re-visioning a story carries a responsibility in deciding which elements of the source material will be changed and which will not. Part of this decision-making process is taking into account the ability that a feminist re-visioning has in eschewing or confronting conventional patriarchal ways of thinking, thereby propelling thought and reasoning into the future without the strictures of the past. The challenge of this is

that fairy tales are so heavily coded with patriarchal convention that changing these narratives could create the impression of a false fairy tale.

### **Textual Analysis and the Creative Component**

The methodological underpinning of this dissertation is textual analysis. Textual analysis was chosen as it is a way to collect information on experiential, socio-historical and cultural phenomena. It highlights patterns, divulges influences and acts as a data-gathering process used in research methodology to understand how units of various cultures identify themselves and infer meaning in and of the world.

Catherine Belsey (2005:160) conceives of textual analysis as a research method involving “a close encounter with the work itself, an examination of the details without bringing to them any more presuppositions than we can help.” If we comprehend meaning-making as a relational process in that meaning is made or things understood in relation to the relationships between history, gender, culture, social periods and people, then we are able to discern that meaning is also made between a person (a reader) and a text. Belsey (2005:168) goes on to argue that there is a dialogue occurring between the text and the reader so that a text is not “an empty space, a vacancy into which we pour whatever we like.” As such, readers are active in their engagement with a text and this may extend across time or setting so that the meaning readers derive from a certain text changes with time, setting and experiences. Belsey (2005:169) discusses this phenomenon by stating that the reader relates differently to a text each time that it appears in a new location hence each time that it is seen, “it is capable of being seen in a new light, related to different knowledges.” Both Sita and Belle are cultural reflections of their time-periods, their settings and gender but they are still referred to today. Therefore, in line with Belsey’s (2005:163) assertions, a textual analysis of the characters and their reactions within their respective contexts in any time-period will “make a contribution to knowledge, it uncovers something new.”

The ‘uncovering’ is essential for meaning-making and comprehension. As a methodology, the uncovering of pathways of meaning and understanding allows a text priority and “sets the agenda,” as Belsey (2005:171) states. Yet in a reader’s active participation with a text, there can be little or no fixed meaning, just meanings

made in relation to other things. Thus, a textual analysis allows for the uncovering of “multiple possibilities, intended or unintended, to be followed up and assessed in the light of what we can learn from the text itself in its relation of difference to the sources it cites” (Belsey, 2005:196).

The analysis of the creative component comprises practice-based research, as “When Sita Met Belle” is the basis of the contribution to knowledge. Practice-based research is “an original investigation undertaken in order to gain new knowledge partly by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice. Claims of originality and contribution to knowledge may be demonstrated through creative outcomes” states Sinthuphan (2018:85). The addition of a creative component such as “When Sita Met Belle” enables the discussion on real world situations populated by real-life people represented in an artistic mode. The creation, then, of the creative piece is through a “process of research through practice” (Winter, 2010:1). No piece of art is created in isolation. It is attached to other experiences, influences and histories and exists not in a bubble but in relation to other things. Thus, the project is able to highlight and detail the influences and relations in the creation of “When Sita Met Belle.” This differs from practice-led research as the practice “leads to new knowledge [ ... and] may be fully described in text form without the inclusion of a creative work” (Sinthuphan, 2018:85). Hence, practice-led research is research that does not culminate in an artifact. However, for practice-based research, Sinthuphan states that a “full understanding can only be obtained with direct reference to the outcomes” (2018:85).

This, then, is a cyclical process; the text having been created in back-and-forth negotiations. As Winter (2010:5) states, practice-based research is an ongoing exchange as “researcher is continually experimenting, changing, and coming up with new ideas [... .] It is not only a living process, but frequently an immediate real-time process.” This ‘living’ thing, then, is imbued with my own experiences, ideas and notions that are reflective of the socio-historic, cultural and psychological experiences of my past. This entails that my own experiences, choices and artifact become a part of the research. In discussing and weighing these aspects of my life, I have viewed my history and choices anew or, at least, through different lenses.

The dissertation engages with the *Beauty and the Beast* narrative written from an Indian woman's perspective, drawing upon the experiences of Sita from Tulsidasa's *Sri Ramacharitamansa*.<sup>4</sup> The discussion analyses the experiences of the characters of Sita and Belle from Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve's *La Belle et la Bête*, or *Beauty and the Beast*, placed in a South African context. I refer to the examination as feminist as it aligns with a "critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, [that] would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves" (Rich, 1972:18). I examine the similarities between the portrayals of women like Charu's friend, Ash, and her aunts in relation to the Sita and Belle-characters and the feminine pressures and fears that are evident and filtered through to Charu. For me, as an Indian woman, the inclusion of Sita as an overarching figure, and Charu's namesake, grounds the story with a contemporary Indian woman in its focus.

Charu is a Hindi name meaning Beauty but, also, ties into the colloquial term of 'charous'<sup>5</sup> used in South Africa. The reader initially meets her through another woman's thoughts and we see the female gaze upon another woman. It is revealed that Charu is taking an unexpected trip abroad under the pretence of delivering her wedding invitation to an old friend. The catalyst for her is that she is pregnant, out of wedlock, and she fears the stigma that would surround her in her community if this were discovered. Yet once she is home, she has to decide if she will go through with the wedding and what this means for her and her daughter. This future is mentioned but left unexplored as it is up to the reader to determine whether Charu would be able to break free of her situation when she leaves her bedroom and open up an entirely different world for the next generation of Sharmas.

Sita and Belle are thematically similar. Villeneuve's Belle is less feisty than the heroine of the popular Disney films. Rather, the original character is more demure, understanding and self-sacrificing. I was drawn to the original because the character refuses the Beast's offer of marriage nightly, believing that she is in love with a dream-Prince, even though she submits to him in the end. In comparison,

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<sup>4</sup> The text is commonly known as *The Ramayana*. The difference lies in the different authors.

<sup>5</sup> Slang term for Indians in South Africa.

Tulsidasa's Sita is less feisty than her counterpart in Valmiki's original text. Tulsidasa has penned a more demure, understanding and self-sacrificing Sita who refuses the daily offers of marriage of the rival king, Ravana, ultimately returning to the husband she loves. However, for me, I see the necessity lies in re-visioning these characters, of imaginatively looking into their psychological reasoning and their societal influences to understand the choices that they had before them and the pressures and fears they faced.

Each chapter is based on a different strand of the *Beauty and the Beast* narrative, including traditional fairy tale elements and with the incorporation of epigraphs from the *Sri Ramacharitamanas*. The effect of this is to steep the chapter with the overarching mood of Sita's experiences in the creative component and connect with the Indian context of the piece. Belle and Sita are alike in their voiceless qualities and experiences, which reverberates through the female characters in "When Sita Met Belle" who each face or have faced their own crises with the 'Beasts' in their lives, building on the themes of isolation, gender narrative, feminine psychology and marginalisation.

These themes are further reflected upon in this project. The first chapter of this reflective component examines the fairy tale genre in general and the contextualisation of the *Beauty and the Beast* narrative in particular. The intention is to explore the presentation of feminine pressures and fears. The second chapter focuses the portrayal of Belle and Sita in their respective stories and examines the depictions of both characters. This includes a discussion on Sita as a divine figure and the Disney treatment of Belle. The third chapter explores the previous re-visions of fairy tales centring on the *Beauty and the Beast* narrative. It divulges the purposes of my choices for these re-visions, the theories on which they operate and the content and form of the novella. The conclusion summarises the necessity of re-visioning fairy tales.



## Chapter 1: A History of Fairy Tales: Game of Tales

### Defining Gen(r)erations

This chapter discusses the genre of fairy tales and the contextualisation of the *Beauty and the Beast* narrative. It is necessary to comprehend the literary history, tradition, the canon of related fairy tales, changes to the narrative from Atwood and Carter that examine feminine pressures and fears, the influence of magic in a tale, the break with traditional fairy tales due to postmodernism and the rewards system inherent in the stories. Upon these aspects, I discuss the re-visioning of *Beauty and the Beast*.

Fairy tales have become synonymous with children's bedtime stories; however, fairy tales had a more specific purpose than children's entertainment. These tales were originally aimed at adults (Zipes, 1999:1). It was during the Renaissance period that a trend begun among writers and storytellers became apparent. This trend was to develop what can broadly be termed as the "oral wonder tale, [which] eventually succeeded to specify and define itself as a separate species and became a literary genre in the late-seventeenth-century France" (Zipes, 2001:xii). Zipes goes on to say that the function of fairy tales is to "awaken our regard for the miraculous condition of life [ ... ] which can be altered and changed to compensate for the lack of power, wealth, and pleasure that most people experience" (2000:848-9).

Charles Perrault and Madame D'Aulnoy paved the way for the modern fairy tale but their stories were darker than the ones we now know. The Brothers Grimm followed thereafter, but their tales were rewritten as complaints abounded of their unsuitability for children (Tatar, 1987:19). The irony and contention lay in the title *Children's and Household Tales*. Yet such complaints removed the previous instructive value of the fairy tale. Bruno Bettelheim criticised the cruelty showcased in the rewritten fairy tales – representative of different psychological conflicts – as weak in the usefulness it could provide to adults and children alike to resolve issues (Zipes, 2014:48).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Further discussion about the psychological aspects of fairy tales will continue in Chapter 3.

Whilst the fairy tale bears similarities with the folktale, there are differences between them. Crucially, a fairy tale may borrow aspects such as storylines, characters, themes, signs and motifs from folktales, myths, legends and other fairy tales it “uses, adapts and remodels during the narrative conception of the author” (Zipes, 2000:xv). The longevity of the genre lies in its ability to resonate with its audience, which implies that it must also be representative and reflective of the period in which it exists. When the ‘wonder tales’ or *contes merveilleux* and *les contes des fées* were published in the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, a new literary tradition was formed (Zipes, 2000:xvi). Now, the advent of computer-generated images (CGI) and special effects has furthered the longevity of fairy tales and allowed them to cross other platforms like television and film.

Russian folklorist, Vladimir Propp, identified thirty-one functions evident in fairy tales, although some are not now applicable to the latest fairy tales (Harland, 1999:154). What has remained, though, is the moment of transformation. This “wondrous change” (Zipes, 2000:xviii) differentiates a fairy tale from other stories. However, some things remain. With the wonder tale, the happy ending is assured but the arrangement of the story, the wonderment and the method by which the happy ending is enjoyed are all at the discretion of the author (Zipes, 2000:xix), which lends leeway to a feminist re-vision.

One of the defining traits of the fairy tale genre is its employment of magic in a realm of fantasy. There are often objects invested with magic, like a spinning wheel or a talking mirror, which can be used to hinder or assist the hero or heroine. Steven Swann Jones puts forth the idea that fairy tales prepare the pitch upon which to discuss hidden feelings, desires or the subconscious that creates a compelling story but which also deploys the use of the fantastic, an aspect that enriches a fairy tale in its use of “poetic and exaggerated symbolism” (2002:11). In addition, there is good magic and wicked magic, but the good characters are always rewarded and the wicked characters are always punished. In this way, morals are encoded into the reader. As Jones (2002:13) further states, the supernatural aspect of fairy tales enforces a sort of cosmic *karma* that is played out as a microcosm. It is this containment that is cathartic.

For “When Sita Met Belle,” I am light-handed with magic and the supernatural, investing only the secondary stories<sup>7</sup> with sparks of them. There is the *tisek*, a mysterious ring, which readers may or may not believe have magical properties, and the appearance of fairy godmother of sorts and her dog, Diana. My reasoning for this is simply that fairy tale magic and *karma* cannot be expected in the real world as I aimed for a modern, realistic setting. This included the cause-and-effect nature of rewards and punishment as indicated in fairy tales. For “When Sita Met Belle,” a subtler and more intrinsic reward system is set up for the characters such as in the case of Aishwarya who finds a gentler love with a female partner than that of her own beastly ex-husband whose punishment, or negative consequence, is having a child when he did not want to start a family with Aishwarya. This, then, sets up a more realistic re-visioning of the rewards system.

Traditional gender roles can be broken with postmodernist culture. In preparing for this project, I encountered a literary canon and tradition of writing as predominantly male-centred. Postmodernist culture<sup>8</sup> allows for more freedom in writing from women and in characterisation of women. In that the experiences of a woman can be heard and explored in storytelling is the combination of a postmodernism and re-visioning. I have built stories within a story in order to capitalise on this phenomenon and the fluidity of meaning in a postmodern world. Meaning is twofold and whilst a writer may insert meaning into a text, it is up to the reader to interpret that meaning. Therefore, in a feminist re-vision, a writer can challenge the masculine narrative, present endings anew and reveal truths and experiences that comfort the female reader in acknowledging that she is not alone in her struggles. However, one must remember that feminist writers are not engaging in battle with fairy tales but providing the next step, the evolution, of its narratives.

### ***Beauty and the Beast: A Fairy Tale as Old as Story Time***

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<sup>7</sup> This includes Miri’s conversation about hair and the appearance of the *tisek* in “When Sita Met Belle.”

<sup>8</sup> Postmodernism supports the idea that social realities are dynamic, forming and reforming in response to environmental stimuli (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005:324). Culture impacts on these social realities and shapes attitudes, actions, thinking and behaviour towards conventional orders of their particular societies (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005:300) and impacts on meaning-making.

Madame Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve was a French writer who wrote *La Belle et La Bête* in 1740, the progenitor of the *Beauty and the Beast* tale.

Villeneuve's eighteenth-century work was aimed at adults and successful in the author's native France with its mild eroticism and inclusion of life in contemporary society, drawing on literary sources such as the medieval legends and Greek romances. The Grimms' fairy tales would follow in 1812 with the success of the tale only outdone by Jeanne-Marie Le Prince de Beaumont's 1756 edition which had been adapted for children. The plot largely remained the same. In each case, the merchant remained with his big family compromising an equal number of sons and daughters, both the Beauty-character and Beast-characters were of noble birth, the Beauty-characters were traded in an agreement between the father-character and the Beast-characters and the inner goodness of the Beast-characters wins the Beauty-characters' heart.

The *Beauty and the Beast* narrative enjoyed staying power evident through various other adaptations of a beastlike or animal-like suitor and a naïve young woman. Evidence of similar Beauty and Beast characters dates back to the classical myth of *Cupid and Psyche* and *Persephone and Hades*. It is also made apparent in the Norwegian fairy tale of *East of the Sun and West of the Moon* (1910) which was translated by Sir George Webbe Dasent, "Bluebeard" (1922) was written by Charles Perrault, *The Piano* in 1993 followed by *Beastly* in 2011<sup>9</sup>, *King Kong* (2005)<sup>10</sup>, the various vampire-inspired series of books and films<sup>11</sup> and *The Shape of Water* (2017); each with their own interpretation of the story, but with a common core<sup>12</sup>. For instance, there is a lonely but smart female character longing for a bigger and better life. Her predominant assets include being well-mannered and beautiful. She is trapped, either metaphorically or physically, and meets a male character who is rough on the outside but gentle on the inside. By looking beneath his external appearance, she falls in love with him and saves him in a variety of ways, each relative to its own adaptation. One of the leading motivations is the Beauty-

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<sup>9</sup> The 2011 film was based on a book of the same name that was released in 2007.

<sup>10</sup> The most recent adaptation of this tale was in 2005 by Peter Jackson, a remake of the 1933 film based on Merian C. Cooper's rough draft of "The Beast" in 1932.

<sup>11</sup> Meyer's *Twilight* series that debuted in 2008.

<sup>12</sup> The archetypal fairy tale elements of a poor girl, a handsome prince and a curse broken only by true love remain.

character's desire for more than the confines of her life and the Beast-character's ability to give this to her, usually by the freedom afforded by wealth. This narrative has a built-in weakness, namely that a woman is unable to attain freedom on her own terms. She needs to marry, usually a man not of her choosing, and the benefits outweigh the sacrifice. The writers may have been imaginatively dealing with the Beauty-character being a victim of Stockholm Syndrome<sup>13</sup> in order to contend with her new existence, yet it is in the simplification of such a reading that we miss the colouring and details of the tale.

Madame de Villeneuve's focus was an exploration of the challenges and concerns of a woman's marital rights in the eighteenth century. Duran Bell contends that the "distribution of a rights in a marriage are seldom symmetric" (1997:240) and that the "securing of a special advantage for a man [husband] generally implies a disadvantage for a woman [wife] if, as is usually the case, her freedom of action is limited while his is not" (1997: 239-40). Thus, there was little freedom for young brides to choose a spouse. These young brides would enter into arranged marriages and this was exemplified in Beauty's captivity, handed over by her father to the Beast.

One of the leading links between the stories, as well as the following versions by Carter and Atwood, is that of the husband as an animal. The animal imagery, the 'beastly' nature of a man, alludes to the sexual demands or appetites of a new husband to which a virginal bride may be unaccustomed. There is also a message behind this metaphor to look beyond the surface and into a person's true nature. Once the Beauty-character is able to accomplish this, she is rewarded with her 'happily ever after.' Interestingly, the Beast-character's transformation into a Prince occurs only *after* the wedding in Madame de Villeneuve's version, whilst other versions have the character transform *before* Beauty agrees to marry him. In each case, aside from Carter's "The Tiger's Bride" which appeared in *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), the tradition has been that the husband undergoes the

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<sup>13</sup> Stockholm syndrome, coined in 1973, described the psychological response of individuals in kidnappings or hostage situations to align themselves with their captors as a survival strategy; however, this positive bond has since encompassed domestic violence and human trafficking (Adorjan, Christensen, Kelly and Pawluch, 2012: 454).

transformation only after the wife is able to love him. Carter's version graces its reader with the twist of the wife changing into an animal, instead. It is this mindset that entices discussions on identity, sexuality and gender equality. I, on the other hand, have made Uvelemva's beastlike husband an actual leopard. In this way, it is an actual beast and alludes to the idea of a leopard not changing its spot.

The original themes and images found in Madame de Villeneuve's version are echoed in Madame Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont's 1756 edition, but the later version is not as strong in its criticism of a woman's limited rights in a marriage. In addition, Madame de Beaumont's rewritten edition was more subdued. The Beast-character was terrifying in appearance but gentle in nature, illustrating the old adage of 'not judging a book by its cover.' He was wealthy and the Beauty-character did not want for any material comfort. This was sufficient enough justification for Madame de Beaumont that "a man should be loved for his inner qualities alone, especially if he has an outwardly repulsive appearance but pots of cash" (Carter, 1991:124). Furthermore, de Villeneuve's Beast-character plainly asks the Beauty-character if he may sleep with her whilst de Beaumont's Beast-character proposes marriage to her with each character thereby taking on the rights accorded to a husband and responsibilities designated to a wife.

In 1979's "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon" and "The Tiger's Bride," Carter uses a lion and a tiger as the respective Beasts. These beasts are more sexually dangerous than Atwood's husband, Ed, in "Bluebeard's Egg,"<sup>14</sup> who is referred to as a sheep. This follows the traditional Beast-character being depicted as an animal and it is left to the Beauty-character to change internally. What interests me about "The Tiger's Bride" is that the titular character was simply referred to as 'the Bride,' as is the case with the female protagonist in "The Bloody Chamber." I find such occurrences telling. Not

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<sup>14</sup> The tie-in to *Bluebeard* is mainly due to the short story that the character of Sally has to write for her class. In comparison to the other Beauty-characters in the fairy tales, and in Carter's writings, Sally is older. She is not on the cusp of womanhood, she does not radiate with virginal beauty, she does not need the advice of others (women) when entering into marriage and she has already gained the knowledge of being a wife. This interests me because it sets up the case for what happens after the curtains on the 'happily ever after' draw to a close. More to my point in this dissertation, fairy tales have clearly set up the perimeter of interpretation and washed over Sally's perspective even in her humdrum life. The hold that fairy tales, or any story that we hear in childhood and which is repeated to us, is powerful. It is enough to have us latch on and colour every experience that we have from childhood through to adulthood. This is what Sally proves in referring to herself as a princess and describing Ed as less than a Prince Charming.

only does the title of 'the Bride' remove all independence, autonomy and notions of self from the character, but it defines her only in relation to the male character. Her status, her title and her worth are linked to someone else. Similarly, in *Sri Ramacharitamanas*, Sita, who is the Beauty-character, is referred to as Janaka's daughter or Rama's consort.<sup>15</sup>

In "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon" and "The Tiger's Bride," Carter looks at patriarchy and the female condition (Dutheil de la Rochère, 2013:257). Her exploration highlights the lack of power that women have over the course of their lives. For instance, in "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon," the Beauty-character of the Bride is equally as powerless in the offering of her person to the Beast-character. The story begins with the Bride telling the reader "[m]y father lost me to The Beast at cards" (Carter, 1979:56). Immediately, we identify her with the original Beauty-character in that she has no power over her life, especially in relation to marital choices. The Bride in "The Tiger's Bride" also has a father in a financial quandary. This Bride's mother was "bartered for her dowry" to a repugnant nobleman and she died thereafter due to "his gaming, his whoring, his agonizing repentances" (Carter, 1979:57).

The father in "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon" plucks a white<sup>16</sup> rose for his daughter but this act is met unfavourably by the Beast-character. In return for his life, the father offers his daughter as a defence. Although Carter writes: "[d]o not think that she had no will of her own," she goes on to state that "she was possessed by a sense of obligation to an unusual degree" (Carter, 1979:48), thus illustrating the uneven balance of patriarchy and the female condition.

Carter views the *Beauty and the Beast* fairy tale as the commodification of women (Koshy, 2010:109). Primarily, this achieves the effect of equating women to objects, to be bartered and exchanged as the Beauty-character is. This idea is further developed by the Beast-character in *The Tiger's Bride* who, in response to the father's dismay at losing his daughter as she leaves for the Beast's abode, says through his valet that he should not have gambled with his "treasures" (Carter,

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<sup>15</sup> Janaka was the king and adoptive father of Sita whilst Rama was her husband. A personal reading of the Hindu epic reveals to me that the importance of Sita is in relation to the men surrounding her.

<sup>16</sup> Symbolically, white represents purity in Western culture and virginity, but widowhood in Hinduism.

1979:58). The Bride sees her worth keenly as she states that the reader “must not think that my father valued me at less than a king’s ransom; but at *no more* than a king’s ransom” (Carter. 1979:57).<sup>17</sup>

The end of “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon” reverts to the original story but with a twist away from the fairy tale. In both tales, the Beast-character withers almost to death in the Beauty-character’s prolonged absence. Both stories have their happy endings invested in the Beast-character returning to his human form once the Beauty-character declares her love for him and breaks his curse, but Carter delves deeper. She transforms the Bride into an animal. The twist is worded such that one begins to suspect that the Bride was a beast all along. “How was it she had never noticed before that his agate eyes were equipped with lids, like those of a man? Was it because she had only looked at her own face, reflected there?” (Carter, 1979:54). This reflection, then, indicates that it is the Beauty-character that carries the curse and that her curse is twice levied. She is cursed with beauty, a trump card for an eligible bride, and she is a reflection of a society that values appearances. It is the Beauty-character who transforms from a human into an animal, with the Beast-character ripping off “all the skins of a life in the world” (Carter, 1979:75) with his tongue. In this way, the Beauty-character is freed from her restrictions and constraints binding her gender in the human world.

Carter based “The Bloody Chamber” on Perrault’s “Bluebeard,” which is also a variant of *Beauty and the Beast*. The tale’s narrator, the Bride, is a young woman recounting the story of her life with the Marquis, a man who dominates her and subverts her identity. She is not seen but, rather, admired like a piece of art, and this notion is heightened by the Marquis being a collector of artistic objects, as well as women (Dutheil de la Rochère, 2009:112). By leaving her mother’s home, she also feels her identity shifting away from her, saying, “I felt a pang of loss as if [ ... ] I had, in some way, ceased to be her daughter in becoming his wife” (Carter, 1979:1). This is a valuable statement of the journey from girlhood to womanhood.

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<sup>17</sup> The idea of commodification is developed in “When Sita Met Belle.”



## No Women, No Cry: Feminist Criticism of Fairy Tales and the Reward System

Fairy tales bring to mind sword-wielding Prince Charmings on horseback rescuing beautiful damsels-in-distress, female characters with heads filled with fanciful thoughts who wait upon their male counterparts to fulfil them and magic that separates or brings them together. The influence that such fairy tales have to the impressionable young is detrimental to their psychological development into adulthood. In effect, they are indoctrinated into narrow pathways of thought, spreading patriarchal values and buying into traditional gender roles that place limitations on women. Marcia Lieberman (in Kuykendall and Sturm, 2007:39) states that the construction of one's identity begins at the subconscious level and this is where an unknown albeit large number of women would have been influenced into emulating behaviours that result in positive rewards<sup>18</sup> from listening to fairy tales.

Karen Rowe (1979:210) notes that the behaviours that win such rewards are feminine virtues like self-sacrifice, passivity and dependence transmitted by the popularity of fairy tales, primarily through romantic alliances. The pressure, then, in achieving such rewards may be both internal and external in the mimicking of these behaviours towards these 'happily ever afters.' Despite the latest British royal wedding<sup>19</sup>, the fairy tale wedding of an average girl with a wealthy prince is not a common expectation of real women; however, fairy tales are a more persuasive and tenacious transmitter of behaviours than of their romantic by-products.

These behaviours and their resultant rewards create an unrealistic division of women into either good and bad. Fairy tales defined 'good' behaviours represent a good woman who reaps positive rewards whilst 'bad' behaviours represent a wicked woman who is punished by negative consequences. One is rewarded with and

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<sup>18</sup> These rewards being a handsome prince as a husband (envy) and a castle filled with riches (financial security). In fact, it should be noted that thinking of a husband and wealth as rewards in the first place are part and parcel of the packaging of fairy tales.

<sup>19</sup> Prince Harry's wedding to Meghan Markle was held on 19 May 2018. Markle was a working actress, American, divorced and not of royal blood. A more detailed discussion follows later.

deemed fit for marriage, exemplified by the 'happily ever after,' whilst the other is destroyed.<sup>20</sup>

The challenge in writing a feminist re-vision of a fairy tale is in the rewards system of marriage and wealth. The behaviours that guarantee these rewards, as discussed, are invested in the conventional fairy tale. Yet it is a narrative that seems separate from the ideals of a modern woman in a contemporary society. The Xhosa expression of *wathint' abafazi*, *wathint' imbokodo*<sup>21</sup> shows that such a narrative is dissonant. In the wake of the #MeToo<sup>22</sup> movement, Beauty's captivity and marriage can be viewed as the result of Stockholm Syndrome. It is in this modern context that asking a woman to trade in her autonomy for dependence, places the culmination of the fairy tale, which is its 'happily ever after,' in jeopardy. A wedding ring should not be a shackle, and this is exactly the reason for a re-vision.

According to Ruth Macdonald (in Zipes, 2012:11), the three available solutions acceptable for feminist fairy tales are a rewriting of the tales, writing of new tales or leaving the tales unaltered. The argument regards changing the nature of fairy tales with regards to creating and writing towards a bias. This argument further states that the reward system is essentially damaged by changing the nature of fairy tales. Atwood's feminist writings rediscover the feminine experience and examine values and points of view relating to gender,<sup>23</sup> thereby advocating for a woman's perspective in her writing. What she does is shift the female perspective into being the subject of a piece of writing by reversing genders, especially of the hero (Koshy, 2010:86-87). By doing so, she brings to light the unequal hierarchical structure between the genders and the historical subjection of women to male dominance.

Perrault's "Bluebeard" tells the story of a new bride overstepping her boundaries by not following her husband's instructions, with dire consequences for the young

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<sup>20</sup> There is the positive female character, Sita, and the negative female character, Surpanakha, in *Sri Ramacharitamanasa*. One is espoused at the detriment of the other.

<sup>21</sup> This translates to 'if you hit a woman, you hit a rock.'

<sup>22</sup> Tarana Burke initiated the #MeToo campaign in 2006 with the desire to achieve "empowerment through empathy" for the survivors of sexual assault (Rodino-Colocino, 2018:97).

<sup>23</sup> Even though she prefers to be called a writer rather than a feminist writer (Wisker, 2011:5), Atwood still writes feminist fairy tales.

woman. Atwood, though, complicates this simple narrative by investing themes of infidelity, trust and hiding the truth in the middle-aged and middle-class couple of Ed and Sally. The stories that follow the *Bluebeard* narrative revolve around women being too curious for their own good and the results that follow. However, whilst the canon may speak of the negative consequences of a woman's curiosity, Tatar argues that it also highlights women's courage and ingenuity (1987:142). What is different in Atwood's "Bluebeard's Egg" is that the fantastical nature indicative of the fairy tale has been shifted to the everyday life of a married couple, which interests me and which I reflect upon in "When Sita Met Belle."<sup>24</sup>

Morals and values are spread through fairy tales. A developing child who listens to these stories imbibes these codes of behaviours and rewards and they are hard to shake as one ages. Yet I feel as if fairy tales can grow as the child grows and that they can be re-visioned in more realistic situations and still have an impact, if not more. Thus, with Ed and Sally, Atwood has created such an existence that is invested with the familiarity of the authentic, everyday life of the couple without the threat of foul magic, vengeful stepmothers, evil witches or murdered wives. However, this normality, also, removes the comfort of having a Prince Charming or 'white knight' saving the day. The reader is not lulled into the security of foreknowledge that the 'happily ever after' is not certain, as is the way with life.<sup>25</sup> MacDonald's assertions aside, this realistic reimagining is vital for what may be the next evolution in fairy tales.

In being more realistic, Carter saw women as sexual creatures on a par with men in their desires and appetites. This was a positive shift in perspective. Her 1978 feminist treatise, *The Sadeian Woman*, conveys this argument, and her views have informed her female characters who act and are not acted upon. Her female characters are passionate, not easily intimidated by their male counterparts and not passive. This shows how experience is structured by digging deeper into a tale than, for instance, Perrault did in his stories (Koshy, 2010:83). "The Bloody Chamber,"

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<sup>24</sup> 'Egg' brings to mind ideas of fertility and hatching. It, also, suggests something hidden and waiting to come to life. The former would pertain to women and their reproductive cycle whilst the latter would pertain to the secret that both husband-characters in the stories have kept from their current wives.

<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, "Bluebeard's Egg" does not have a true ending. It ends on a continuum of life. It is devoid of a pro-social outcome or the hint of what happens next. In fact, I prefer such an 'ending' as it is more realistic.

then, can be seen as an exercise in showing the consequences and following the trail of a history of patriarchy and unfairness visited upon women and their subjugation to them. A fairy tale, as a result, is a non-threatening vehicle for which to transmit these 'realer' experiences of Carter's ideology. Historically, women were regarded as objects of desire; however, Carter views the object of desire as one that is "defined in the passive case. To exist in the passive case is to die in the passive case – that is, to be killed. This is the moral of the fairy tale about the perfect woman" (Carter, 2013: 76-77). Such an existence, and death, are not enticing at all and serve only to rile up and fuel rewritings.

Rewritings have, in most cases, relied deeply on intertextuality. Both Atwood's and Carter's rewritings are heavily intertextual. What they have in each story are threads of different fairy tales tied into one narrative. In respect to Atwood's work, Sarah Wilson found five objectives relating to intertexts. These indicate the nature and the quality of the cultural contexts of the characters, highlight the entrapment in and of pre-existing and imposing patterns as well as comment on them and the intertextuality with the aim of, at the very least, an imaginative release from these patterns that provides the key to transformation from characters within the story to real-world people (Wilson, 1993:34). "When Sita Met Belle" follows a similar path by weaving together threads that fit into and encourage the agency and autonomy of women.

Fairy tales are optimistic. They show that a better future is waiting. Usually this future involves a rich husband but it is exactly this optimism of having something better that a feminist re-visioning can claim. The future builds on the past. The past is known but the future is not. Whilst we can use the past to predict a way forward into the future, the future is still unknown and open to exploration. People live vicariously through characters and it is in believing and viewing these characters as open to exploration, to breaking out of their restrictions that they begin to believe that they are capable of such a feat. Novelist Marina Warner calls this "heroic optimism" (1995:xvi) and it is this very notion that brings about belief, change, influence and the uncharted territory of the future.

## Chapter 2: Why Sita Fits: A Comparison between the Characterisations of Belle and Sita and the Reasons for their Combination

This chapter discusses the portrayal of Belle and Sita in their respective stories. It examines the depictions of both characters by comparison and drawing out the stereotypes that need to be changed. I also discuss Sita as a divine figure and what this meant for the re-visioning as well as the Disney treatment of fairy tales and how the impact on the audience. There is an expectation in the continuing consistency in fairy tales. The reception of these tropes is in expectation of these consistencies.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, it is the language used that creates and governs these expectancies. As cultural theorist Stuart Hall notes, reality exists outside of language but “it is constantly mediated by and through language and what we can know and say has to be produced in and through discourse” (1980:166-7). This is how meaning is formed and explored, impacted upon by and viewed through gender, cultural, social and community lenses. This is the relationship that one has and creates with any text. Furthermore, once a text has been published, the reader is able to derive meaning for himself or herself. Yet there is another layer of which we must take cognisance and that is the religious layer. With texts such as the *Sri Ramacharitamanasa*, the relationship between the reader and the text is different. The message is more powerful and often thought of as unalterable.

Whereas with a fairy tale, one can question the text and, in this investigation, discover whether a code of behaviour or motive is applicable to one in one’s life, with *Sri Ramacharitamanasa* considered as Hindu scripture, the questioning is expected to only strengthen the message already decoded for the reader. A re-visioning of the experiences of Sita is difficult for this reason. As with fairy tales, the widespread distribution and ready reception of these texts have solidified the messages therein to the point where a reader no longer questions them. This naturalisation of coded messages is worrisome for a feminist re-vision as the universal acceptance of a message allies it with fact.

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<sup>26</sup> These may include the *evil* witch or the *cruel* stepmother, the *damsel-in-distress*, a *daring* rescue by a *handsome* prince and a happy ending.

Disney has been impressive in naturalising aspects of the fairy tales, particularly with regard to gender roles, female submission and masculine domination, rewards and punishment. The contents of Disney adaptations, although different from the fairy tale, have superseded their predecessors. For instance, the widespread distribution of the phrase “and they lived happily ever after” is now synonymous with fairy tales but it is not an accurate reflection of the fairy tale or reality, at least not in the way that it is delivered.

Sadly, the women of most power and with the greatest agency in the traditional fairy tales are those who are depicted as villainous, hated and often described as ugly. Kuykendall and Sturm (2007:39) see the exception to this rule as the fairy godmother who is in possession of enough magic to effect a change of the heroine’s fortunes, yet they also note that she is not completely human due to her magical quotient which disqualifies her from being a true woman. Interestingly, a woman with magic at her disposal would be more powerful than a man without, no matter other extenuating forms of agency, thus, this female character is disregarded. For “When Sita Met Belle,” I have created the character of Miri who is reminiscent of a Fate; one of the Weird Sisters who is able to read the future. I intentionally crafted her as one of the most womanly of characters from her dressing to her mannerisms. Miri impresses Charu with her beauty and insight. She has a deeper connection to the world around her and feels the plight of women keenly. I have depicted her thus in the re-visioning in order to stymie the perpetuation of the negative stereotyping of powerful women. Charu carries Miri’s voice, her warning and her words with her as she settles into her wedding arrangements, as a fairy godmother of sorts, one without direct impact but still affecting change; one that is more internal rather than the external magic of fairy tales.

Since 2010, a new spin on the traditional fairy tale captured the imagination of audiences. With *Brave* in 2012, *Frozen* in 2013 and *Maleficent* in 2014, the depiction of the jealous older woman character has been turned on its head. It is, indeed, a re-visioning of the trope that has played on depicting more positive interpersonal female relationships between mother and daughter, sisters and pseudo-stepmother and step-daughter, respectively.

## ***Sri Ramacharitamanasa: What's in a Name?***

*Ramacharitamanasa* means the 'lake of deeds of Rama' due to Rama's many good deeds. *Sri Ramacharitamanasa* is a complex tale of adventure, romance, family obligations, duties, responsibilities, friendship, heroism and devotion. It reads like a fairy tale most of the time. Of prime importance in the story is the message of following one's *dharma*.<sup>27</sup> Although Rama is often praised for his virtuous deeds, it is Sita who struggles as a consequence of his actions. Yet her continuing suffering is what is used to define the epitome of what is deemed an ideal woman.

Being one of the most popular tales in the Indian culture, the story holds important religious value and is often taken as fact, with the characters of Rama and Sita being considered as avatars of the gods. Through the various adaptations, both characters have remained as the ultimate standards of perfection and examples of behaviour which men and women should emulate. Upon a later reading, the concern for me was in the depiction of a docile, meek and subservient Sita that has been held up as an ideal to be imitated by women and girls, even though she is depicted as the incarnation of a goddess. Of further concern is Sita's treatment by her husband<sup>28</sup> after she is rescued from her kidnapper, Ravana.

The literal trial by fire that she undergoes to prove her innocence and devotion has always made me balk, despite the fact that I have met very few people with similar reactions. In some adaptations, Sita goes through these trials twice; the first after her husband rejects her following their reunion and the second owing to an off-handed remark spurred by gossip by a washerman, and is she still exiled by her husband without proof, and knowing of her innocence. Yet even through her fiery trial, Rama has a pusillanimous stance towards his wife's innocence in the face of the opinion of one of his citizens. This leads to Sita's ultimate rejection. It is that she is submissive throughout these events, foregoing even speaking up for herself, that is unnerving. Whilst Tulsidasa's later version foregoes Sita's second trial by fire, Valmiki's original epic poem shows Sita taking a stand. However, at its core, this stand is suicide as

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<sup>27</sup> This is the path of righteousness, of doing the right thing and keeping the social order.

<sup>28</sup> Rama is also an incarnation (avatar) of a god, Vishnu.

she is 'swallowed' by the earth. Furthermore, Sita undergoes both trials and a second exile without much reproof; an obedient wife to the end. The improbability of this myth is not in doubt but the ideals of the perfect woman that it propagates are impossible to attain.

Sita has little agency in the *Sri Ramacharitamanasa* but she has ability. She is able to prepare the castle for her guests by a single thought due to being invested with such powers as she is an avatar of the Goddess Parvati.<sup>29</sup> However, even this ability of powerful magic is still within the realm of domesticity, much like Belle cleans without complaint and the other Beauty-characters are placed in domestic settings.

Sita is not able to act with independence. In fact, she is often referred to as "Janaka's daughter" or Janaki, a diminutive variant of Janaka, her adoptive father. Her sole act of defiance against her husband's wishes<sup>30</sup> leads to her abduction and war. The abduction of Sita brings to mind the abduction of Persephone by Hades. In both cases, both women are daughters of the earth. Persephone is the goddess of the spring and daughter to the goddess of agriculture. Sita was found by King Janaka in the furrows of a ploughed field. Both disappear into the earth. For Persephone, it was Hades who kidnapped her and took her to the underworld but it is Sita who chooses to return to the earth when her duties as wife and mother are at an end.

As a significant text in Hinduism, *The Mahabharata*<sup>31</sup> stands alongside the *Sri Ramacharitamanasa* with its central female character of Draupadi. The idealisation of Sita is focused upon her steadfast devotion to Rama, no matter the hardships sprung upon her. Her struggles seem only to serve and strengthen the suffering, silent woman archetype. As Sally J. Sutherland states, "Throughout the epic we see her as a faithful and loyal wife who suffers precisely because of these virtues"

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<sup>29</sup> In *Sri Ramacharitamanasa*, when Sita is made aware of Rama's arrival into the city, "She manifested Her glory [divine power] to a certain extent. By Her very thought, She summoned all the Siddhis (miraculous powers personified) and despatched them to wait upon the king and his party" (*Sri Ramacharitamanasa*, Bala-Kanda, 305, 1-4).

<sup>30</sup> Sita insists on her brother-in-law defying her husband's instruction to protect her and asks him to leave. This leaves her vulnerable to King Ravana's abduction.

<sup>31</sup> *The Mahabharata* was composed by the sage Vyasa in the sixth century BCE.



(1989:77). Sita chooses to follow Rama into exile, to abandon a comfortable life in a palace as the daughter of a king and the wife of a prince. This act challenges the prescribed notions of behaviour for women in that society and for characters who seek the life of comfort rather than abandon it. Like Sita, Draupadi follows her husbands<sup>32</sup> into exile and is abducted by the ruler of that kingdom when she is left unattended. The difference between the women is that Draupadi voices her discontent with her suffering brought about by her husbands. Although her husband, Yudhisthira, is primarily responsible for most of the calamities that befall her, her other husbands fail to protect her at different points like the game of dice. Draupadi relays her woes in saying, "I was forced to become a slave. I blame only these strong Pandavas, men to be held best in battle [...] stood by while men insulted me" (*Mahabharata*, 1973: 3:222:4a-7ab). When she is assaulted in King Virata's court, Draupadi asks her husband, "Where is the anger, the virility and courage of those who do not wish to defend a wife from a wicked man?" (*Mahabharata*, 4.15:21), which is a question that echoes Sita's plight in the face of rumours of her infidelity with her abductor, Ravana.

The fire that Sita lacks is found in Draupadi. Draupadi's statement upon hearing that her abductor would not be punished shows rage and humiliation. The text describes the moment in which Draupadi speaks to her husbands, Bhima and Arjuna, as full of passion. She says, "If you want to do me a kindness, kill that lowest of humans, that outcast...that evil, wretched defiler" (*Mahabharata*, 3.255. 44-45). This moment of a woman standing up for herself in the face of the men who do nothing is powerful. After suffering yet another assault, Draupadi voices her rage, helplessness and unhappiness with her husbands. This brings into contrast Sita's selfless devotion to Rama. Her complaints differentiate her from Sita and go against the grain of the idea of an ideal wife. Draupadi's fiery indignant stance stands as a contrast to Sita's submissiveness. Whilst the former is active in protecting her virtue, it is Sita who is elevated and viewed as the normative version of femininity in Hindu society (Roy, 1975:33). Yet, this highlights how her helplessness and unhappiness tie her to a society that humiliates her as a wife and a woman and, then, expects the internalisation of that humiliation.

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<sup>32</sup> Draupadi has five husbands at the same time.

The spouses of both women fail to protect their wives from this shame and embarrassment. Whilst Draupadi's husbands are of a lesser status in society than the king who humiliates their wife, Rama is a king of one of the most powerful cities of that era, but he is powerless. Rama is a king tied to the opinions of his people which equates to his wife being subservient to a greater degree than any other person in the kingdom. In both instances, the defence of the wife – the woman in society – is lacking. Both women are victimised and sacrificed. The idealisation of the 'chaste woman' narrative lies then in submissiveness, being reserved when one should stage an outcry, being resigned to one's fate when one should question it and displaying stoic silence when one should be demanding one's rights. Personally, I would have liked to have seen a different Sita as a cultural heroine, one not defined or dependent on her husband. Like Draupadi, a female character who is able to have a strong sense of self and not play second fiddle to the male protagonist is appealing to a modern woman.

Fairy tales, folklore, our history, myths and religious texts provide many chances for writers to re-vision the familiar female characters. Our roots run deep with the characters of legend, ones with whom we have known since childhood. These characters have provided gender markers for children who grow into adulthood. These stories have also stunted our freedoms, independence and gender development. Equality allows for both women and men to grow, learn and interact. The oppression and subjugation of one in favour of the other negatively impedes both. However, even though there is a deficit of strong women in the written texts of the past, this does not mean that contemporary writers cannot use them as sources of inspiration. Re-visioning these characters can make for stronger roots.

### **Valmiki's *Ramayana*, A Brief Comparison**

Valmiki's *Ramayana* is the epic poem that is regarded as the progenitor of all tales regarding Rama and Sita. *Sri Ramacharitamanasa* follows on from Valmiki's saga. Like the *Beauty and the Beast* retellings, the narrative may vary but key events, *dharmic* dilemmas and the crux of the story remain. Yet there are differences that raise critical points of interest and require analysis.

The *agnipariksha* comes about as, at the end of the war with Ravana, a victorious Rama does not meet his wife with equal joy and excitement as she does him. Instead, he “addressed some reproachful words to Her. On hearing them, the demon ladies (who had accompanied Her) all began to lament” (*Sri Ramacharitamansa, Lanka-Kanda, 1–7, 108, p.947*). He chooses not to look at his wife who had been through, in my estimation, more of an ordeal in comparison to him, but conveys to her that the war upon Ravana had been fought only to avenge his honour and that of his clan. He says that Sita should “Go where thou wilt, but not with me. How should my home receive again A mistress soiled with deathless stain? How should I brook the foul disgrace, Scorned by my friends and all my race?” (*The Ramayana of Valmiki: Canto CXVIII, 4-8, p.1750*).

Her freedom means not a return *to* him but that she is released *from* him. Upon hearing him say, “All this effort has been not to attain personal satisfaction for you or me. It was to vindicate the honour of the Ikshvahu race and to honour our ancestors’ codes and values” (Narayan, 2006:212), Sita cries that her trials are not yet over (Narayan, 2006:213) and pleads with Lakshmana, her brother-in-law, to build a fire, intending to commit suicide. Yet Sita walks through the fire unscathed. There are two reasons given for this. The first is that Sita is protected by the God of Fire<sup>33</sup> and the second is that she had not had sexual contact with her kidnapper. It is only then that Rama accepts Sita saying that, as the consort of a king, she has to be “From every blot and blemish free” (*The Ramayana of Valmiki: Canto CXX, 15, p.1755*) as his people would not accept her as their queen if she had not proven herself through the *agnipariksha*. This reflects the idea that a man is great leader based on the virtues of his wife. It is best that such virtues are publicly proven. Of prime significance in Valmiki’s text, we are presented with Sita’s second exile. Tulsidasa’s version omits this second exile. A reason behind this could be that Sita is more forceful, verbally, in her vindication.

The *Uttara Kanda* of *The Ramayana* is the missing section in which Rama banishes Sita whilst pregnant with twins. This comes about due to gossip that is overheard

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<sup>33</sup> Agni

from a washerman who disparages Sita's claim that she remained unmolested by Ravana during her long captivity. Unfortunately, there is no trial for Sita. Instead, Rama asks his brother to take Sita to a sage's ashram in the forest. This sage is Valmiki, the poet who inserts himself into the story.

There is some contention as to whether this section of the text is a later addition or part of the original text. Since it is already a part of the canon, it does bear some weight in this regard. Whilst I can understand Rama's reasoning from a social or political standpoint, the idea that Rama has divested himself from his kingliness or personal judgement is absurd. It can be up for contention that Rama exiled Sita to safeguard his reputation as king or, as is more readily argued for, to maintain *dharma*. The initial *agnipariksha* should have sufficed to have proven Sita's claims, especially as her purity was attested to by a god. A strongly willed man or, especially, a god-king would not have been so easily swayed by public opinion in the face of the truth that had been presented to him by a god and about which he professed to have known the truth all along in a later discourse. Rama has the love of his people and reigns at a veritable golden age, yet he is shown to be a man looking for approval and erring in a crucial judgement.

For me, it is significant that the Persephone myth that ties into the *Beauty and the Beast* narrative is reminiscent of Sita's story. For instance, both Persephone and Sita are daughters associated with the Earth, harvesting and agriculture. Persephone is the daughter of Demeter, known as the Greek goddess of the harvest, agriculture and fertility. Sita is often referred to as the daughter of the earth because she was found in a dusty furrow on one of King Janaka's travels. Over and above this, she is the avatar of the Goddess Lakshmi.<sup>34</sup>

Despite this, just as fairy tales are not the roadmap for a young girl intent on becoming an independent woman, so too is Sita not the standard for the modern woman. *Sri Ramacharitamansa* is a product of its time. The age and society for which it was written is now centuries past. Even if we are to contend that the story portrays an ideal society with ideal qualities possessed by ideal characters, we must

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<sup>34</sup> Goddess Lakshmi is the goddess of wealth and consort to Lord Vishnu.

also allow for the notion of change. The story of Rama cannot be seen as a moral compass for today's society but a story of morality. The *Ramayana* and *Sri Ramacharitamanasa* have contributed significantly to the literary history of Indian culture, but we must view the lessons contained therein through the lens of contemporary society.

Women empowerment has been an important area of concern and literature can do much to further its aims. Nobel laureate Dr. Amartya Sen, in his book expounding individual freedom, emphasises the empowerment of women as “one of the central issues in the process of development for many countries in the world today” (Sen, 1999:2). Literature can provide positive role models that are easily accessible to children and can provide the roadmap for actions, behaviours, thoughts and freedoms for each gender. It is demoralising to look around the vast library of literature available and find gender disempowering notions, subtle and egregious, readily accepted and published without forewarning. In writing the creative component for this project, I was further made aware of my personal blindness and acceptance of literature and writing that was andro-centric as it was the form of literature and writing style that had always been abundantly present.

In Hinduism's iconic epic poem, Sita is the incarnation of a goddess, yet she has to endure more unfair treatment and trials than any normal human being. This is despite her displaying the socially appropriate and expected qualities of the women of her time. She is beautiful, chaste, dutiful and completely devoted to her husband. She is kind, loving and meek as a daughter. She is gracious and caring as a daughter-in-law. “She lends charm to charm itself” (*Sri Ramacharitamanasa, Bala-Kanda*, 229 1–4, p.225). Yet her depiction is that of the damsel-in-distress, one akin to fairy tales in which the strong prince has to rescue the beautiful princess from an aggressive villain. To add further insult to this portrayal, she has her faithfulness and womanly virtue questioned by her husband. Rama, on the other hand, does not have these questions asked of him although he has also been equally separated from Sita

as she from him.<sup>35</sup> He does not endure any public questions or the *agnipariksha*, neither does he support his wife as a husband or his queen as a king.

This lack of support is indicative of the societal and cultural climate in which a person chooses to listen to the external voices of society, rather than to the internal trust in an intimate relationship. Also, it is reflective of women who have their reputation dangling in the public eye instead of trust being afforded and respect. That Rama makes the choice to banish Sita from Ayodhya rather than give her a trial, much like King Arthur was forced to do when Guinevere's relationship with Lancelot was questioned, makes him an unjust king and a weak husband. To continue to uphold Rama as the ideal without question or critical discussion is a sign of regressive thinking. To continue to expect Sitas in modern times, by using texts that enforce these stereotypical gender roles, will not lead to the progress about which Dr. Sen speaks.

### **Disney's Influence**

While print and film are different media, Disney has been able to 'kidnap' the fairy tale genre and hold the narrative hostage to its whims. There are various differences between the Villeneuve version of the fairy tale and the film versions but, for the purposes of the dissertation, I discuss a few key points as pertain to the topic and the written component.<sup>36</sup>

### **The Rose and the Father, Magic and Marriage**

Roses are associated with being a symbol of love and affection, the red rose being the most prominent of these. From the Villeneuve tale, the rose is the cause of Belle's captivity. In the films, the rose symbolises the Beast's imprisonment, time ticking down to free himself from the curse. Ironically, the rose is held in a bell jar, captive itself. Disney heightens the fairy tale element of magic by making this rose

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<sup>35</sup> One may believe this is because Rama is the king and a subject of the king would not speak against his ruler, but Sita is the queen of the same state and yet she is subjected to these questions. It must also be noted that Sita was abducted by Ravana. Even if she had been raped, she was a victim and not an adulteress.

<sup>36</sup> Further discussion occurs in Chapter 3 around the changes made by Disney to the fairy tale genre.

enchanted; however, for Villeneuve, it was an ordinary flower representing desires by a girl that could land her into trouble. This is a cage, itself.

In Villeneuve's tale, when Belle's father plucks the rose for his daughter, it incenses the Beast who resolves to imprison him for his transgression. Yet her father bargains for an exchange. He trades his daughter's captivity for his freedom. This is basically the premise of arranged marriages. Fathers would trade their daughters to future husbands for a dowry. The tradition of dowry is a grave concern in India as many dowry disputes are linked to cases of domestic abuses. "Physical violence, emotional trauma among women, and even death can be often traced to disputes over monetary transfers related to the now entrenched tradition of dowry" (Chacko, 2003:57). Yet to smooth over this societal wrinkle, Disney creates the self-sacrificing character of Belle who volunteers herself to save her father. This further adds to the nature of female subservience.

The idea of eighteenth-century life for young women echoes through the arranged marriage aspect as Belle is sent to live in relative isolation with a strange man, having no human company around her. Villeneuve allows her the company of monkeys and birds. Disney differs here to include magically speaking furniture for comical and musical purposes. This, also, ties into the magical component.

Love does not gently come between Belle and her Beast. Whilst the film adaptations smooth over this transition through books and dinners, Villeneuve's Belle has more realistic struggles in coming to love her Beast. In the book, the Beast asks Belle to marry him every night after supper, only to meet with her refusal. To complicate the situation, the Prince traipses into Belle's dreams and she falls in love with him. I find this Belle to be a bit foolish especially in this instance by not piecing together that the Beast and Prince are one and the same.

### **Female Jealousy and Rivalry**

For the written component, I steered away from falling victim to the traditional component of female jealousy and rivalry as obstacles to a lady's happiness. In Villeneuve's edition, Belle's sisters follow what has become conventional villainy,

exhibiting extreme jealousy of Belle's behaviour, beauty and good fortune. In the films, Belle is an only child, thereby creating two new characters in LeFou and Gaston to play the part of villains and create a bit of comedy.

Using female jealousy and rivalry creates a problematic solution. A re-vision promotes a new formula for shifting the narrative towards successful women empowerment. Yet the inspiration for it, the motivation for the change of the future, has to come from the past. Ancient texts and old fairy tales provide the origins of influence for characters and narratives, and their re-visionings can change the mindset and affect the next generation differently.

Female characters need to be venerated, their strengths showcased and their agency given their own storylines. Literature has not been kind to those characters who contravene their pre-established roles. In the case of *Sri Ramacharitamansa*, there are strong female characters who are not seen in a favourable light. For instance, Kaiyeki is one of Rama's stepmothers who goes onto the battlefield with her husband, King Dasaratha, and saves his life. This feat is left unexplored and she is branded as the stereotypical evil stepmother. Surpanakha, Ravana's sister, has her nose hacked off by Lakshmana. The tale depicts her as a lust-filled demon intent on stealing Rama from his wife, but it does not gainsay the actions of the brothers who tease her mercilessly. Her resultant attack on Sita is seen as an act of female jealousy. The female characters' stories are not given equal narrative weight but the male narratives are portrayed as of greater value than the female narratives. The message that one receives, then, is that women who make their own decisions, have strong wills, act on their own agency and desires that are independent of the male characters, are not to be emulated.



### Chapter 3: Re-visioning in fairy tales and “When Sita Met Belle”

This chapter examines the previous re-visions of fairy tales by focusing on the *Beauty and the Beast* narrative. I explore how “When Sita Met Belle” re-visions this fairy tale. In addition, it explains the purposes of my choices for this re-vision and the theories upon which they operate and analyses the content of the novella. This explanation includes reception theory, stereotyping of female characters, power imbalance, female jealousy, the internalisation of patriarchal tyranny by women and the need to escape confinement. The stories considered in this chapter are “Bluebeard’s Egg” and “The Bloody Chamber” with specific Disney adaptations.

The eighteenth century scholar, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and twentieth century literary critic, John Updike, argue that fairy tales are nonsensical fantasies and that children should be discouraged from them (Warner, 1995:xiv). Their point is valid to a certain degree. Whilst fairy tales are popular stories for children, they are also remembered by adults. Their tenacity for staying in the public’s mindset is laudable, however, for me, I would have to insist that updated fairy tales can greatly assist in aiding cultural, societal and gender progress. Children should not be dissuaded from hearing fairy tales but the type of fairy tales that they hear must change. The reason for this is that encoded messages in the fairy tales that children hear regarding gender or behavioural patterns that yield rewards or negative consequences become entwined with their perception of the world and their roles in it. Stuart Hall’s reception theory which deals with the acceptance and naturalisation of conventional fairy tales; with the genre’s coded language, its themes, images, morals and characters becoming so ingrained into a discursive practice that children from a very young age become products of the messages in fairy tales instead of deconstructing those messages (Hall, 1980:167). This must stop. Deconstruction must occur or children will feel dissonance between the roadmaps guiding socialisation and gender and the contemporary world.

For a re-visioning to be effective, it must break the stereotypes already prevalent in society today, to see anew with untainted lenses. The audience for which a re-visioning has been produced needs to be considered. If a re-visioning is meant to

challenge the notions of female passivity and male agency, then it must appeal to the audience to which it speaks. The *Zeitgeist* of the time must be captured and presented in a manner which attracts the viewer or reader to accept it. Acceptance is a mammoth undertaking as a re-vision goes against the presiding norms of a collective audience. In this arena, Disney has proven to be able to exist within this dynamic frame. *Mulan* and *Brave* are both examples of Disney films that have reinvigorated the fairy tale franchise by shaking up the tropes and positing feminist narratives with female protagonists who are braver and more powerful than their male counterparts. The question then becomes whether the audience accepts such a break with conventions as it is ready for it or whether Disney packages it in such a way that makes it more palatable to the audience.

Zipes states that one of the stereotypes evident in fairy tales is power (Wilson, 1993:33). It is a strong stereotype that necessitates addressing in any re-visioning. Traditionally, female characters have had less power in these stories due to the heritage of fairy tales, the time periods and creation-history of the tales. In the traditional versions of fairy tales, women are portrayed as objects and, like an object, she has no agency of her own. She is born as pretty as her mother, she waits for a rescue, magic is responsible for getting her to a ball and it is the prince or male love interest that chooses her. Even though Belle voices her hopes of escape, her most notable traits are her patience and beauty. That she loves books is a passing line in the Villeneuve edition and only grows in depiction in the Disney and film variants. It is only in the television series, *Once Upon A Time* (2011), that the Belle-character actually uses the knowledge she has gleaned from her books to her advantage.

*Once Upon A Time* (2011) is, itself, based on multiple fairy tales reworked into one convoluted story. It began with strong feminist strides by handing the reins of agency and change to its female protagonist, Emma Swan. There were no beasts to redeem themselves through love and hostage situations in the initial seasons, no damsels-in-distress that could not rescue themselves or prove stronger than their suitors in wit and swordplay, and magic was wielded by the female characters in order to rescue themselves. The show faltered when it succumbed to the traditional masculine alternatives in the successive seasons which ultimately led to the demise of the series. Yet its strong following showed that there is an audience for such an

endeavour. A feminist re-vision seeks to give more power to the marginalised female characters and a true voice to the female condition which is what I sought to do in “When Sita Met Belle.” For this reason, I penned Charu’s aunt as explicitly saying, “I hoped that I would be blessed with a daughter so that I may tell her the stories that only women know” (Chundhur, 2019:85).

This is Charu’s trap, one similar to a modern climate. Whilst social media and technology have opened the gates to access and communication across countries and networks, people are still housed in their own communities and cultures. Charu is not trapped in a castle but hers is more of a prison of reputation and expectations met upon her by circumstances of gender, age, society and culture which is found in her predominantly Indian South African context. This is, then, *her* ‘provincial life’ of which Belle sings in *Beauty and the Beast* (2017).<sup>37</sup> When she thinks on the banks of Liloche, a trapped body of water built by a merchant for his children, she remembers feeling afraid of being dragged away by the water as a child but, as an adult, longs for the freedom that such a removal from her impending marriage would bring. Her little spot on the pier allowed her to breathe, to feel honestly without pressure. Looking at the water, Charu realises that she wants to be as free as the waves but that such a journey takes time, for every wave has seen an eternity. The waves, themselves, have a history. When she returns home, she finds the experience “like putting on an old pair of shoes and finding that they did not fit the way they once had” (Chundhur, 2019:57).

Meeting Bartholomew East at the water’s edge is another form of freedom offered to her because, not only does it give her an alternative to going through with an obvious mistake of a wedding, Bartholomew also leaves the decision of contacting him in her hands. Whereas the Beauty-characters of the books had the option of returning to the Beast after they visited their families and subsequently realising that they had fallen in love with their respective Beast-characters, here Charu is not in love with Barry but it is the power of choice that she has that is important. The fairy tales offer the reader the comfort of knowing that Beauty will return to the Beast and save him. In “When Sita Met Belle,” that safety-net is removed. Charu takes the final step to

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<sup>37</sup> Bill Condon’s adaptation from 2017

walk away from her fiancé who is the Beast-character of the story, even though Bartholomew saves his mobile number as B. East. Yet her true beast is herself. To stop the cycle, she says, “I would raise the child snug in my belly with new fairy tales. I would create for her the story of Sita anew” (Chundhur, 2019:85). Charu makes this promise irrespective of whether that child “chose to be a girl or a boy” (Chundhur, 2019:85) which leads us to believe that Charu will, indeed, let this child live more freely in thought and action than she has.

Feminist criticism of fairy tales revolves around the spreading of patriarchal ideals and values, the concern of which entails the curtailing of a young woman’s journey to womanhood and her exploration and experience thereof. Aside from the dependency on males and their lack of agency as discussed, reinforcement of these ideals comes from other women. The community of women is strong and a young girl would look to other women for guidance and/or modelling. This cycle of victimhood, of women subjugated by ideals that they now enforce, is a theme that needs further exploration. I touch upon this in the dynamic between Charu and her mother; in how the elder Sharma has kept everything in its place physically with regard to her household items but denied her daughter access to information which would have saved her daughter from a marriage to a ghastly man. This lack of female bonding is another concern.

When the family is gathered in preparations for the wedding events, the gaps in their conversations realise this lack. It is within these gaps that patriarchy forms as weeds and starts to grow. In the story of the haunted house, Uncle Lucky tells a re-envisioned story of *Snow White* based on Carter’s “The Snow Child.” Whilst the latter is an erotic tale, Uncle Lucky’s tale is more gothic in its telling. Without proper female bonding, as in Carter’s tale, the mother is unable to protect her child as she is unaware of the issue at hand. In Charu’s case, her mother deliberately holds back information and this creates a chasm between them that extends through the years.

I have not included the binary opposition between female characters that fuels most fairy tales. This opposition is represented by female jealousy as in the case of stepmothers to their stepdaughters and between stepsisters. Kuykendall and Sturm (2007:39) note the negative consequence of building this aspect of jealousy by

relegating this emotion to common gender stereotypes, thereby creating a scenario of the damsels being placed in constant emotional distress or physical harm due to jealous older women like Belle's sisters in the Villeneuve edition. The closest that one comes to this aspect in "When Sita Met Belle" is in the depiction of Aishwarya's two sisters and her ex-husband's new wife.<sup>38</sup> However, I have chosen to write the former relationships as a case of indifference and the latter as more an internalisation of comparisons. In the traditional writing of these relationships, the conflict creates the dichotomy of the good woman versus the bad woman, and our choice of support is made firmly for us. I preferred to create the story without this dichotomy. For me, this is a way of breaking out of that stereotype and a wish to inculcate sisterhood instead of patriarchy. This is, also, the reason for the storytellers, except for Uncle Lucky's story within a story, being female.

The idea to have Charu's Beast and father absent in "When Sita Met Belle" is purposeful. In this way, I have the character act autonomously and her actions show how the patriarchal systems caged her and the other female figures' thinking processes without a man being physically present. The opportunity to form an autonomous identity is, thus, shown as difficult, especially in the face of some of the characters that perpetuate the system. In the last chapter, the image that Charu leaves with is that of the two sisters – Saroj and Madhuri – holding hands. "I noticed my hands, lonely as they were, had reached out for each other, mimicking the sisters" (Chundhur, 2019:84). Thus, the rescue does not come from a knight in shining armour, or even a man, but from the shining example of women-to-women empathy and support.

I did not want to excuse women from the internalisation of patriarchal tyranny. It is the norm in some fairy tales to place the blame on some enchanted thing, like a mirror, or magic gone awry. Historical precedents and the historical setup of patriarchy is, thus, forgotten in the face of evil, magic, vindictiveness or jealousy. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have found that the *Snow White* narrative does not acknowledge the treatment of the New Queen as a victim of patriarchal tyranny and

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<sup>38</sup> Aishwarya is Charu's oldest friend who is able to discern the differences between a younger, more vibrant Charu and her current character.

that the New Queen, as a woman, suffers because this condition is treated as normal (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979:9). Should such an occurrence be perpetuated, then it becomes a vicious circle so ingrained in the mindset that re-visions fail at conception.

Carter and Atwood have shown in their retellings that patriarchy and the female internalisation of this system create and maintain obstacles for women. As Charu and her aunt argue with Madhuri, the reader becomes aware that it will take courage and encouragement to change things from the old norm to a new norm. Madhuri says that children “think they have the right to question their mothers on the choices they made in their name” (Chundhur, 2019:75). She further wonders what people would say if they knew the actual battle that women fought (Chundhur, 2019:75). For me, a greater injustice is not the creation of patriarchal subordination but the perpetuation of it as the norm; women teaching each other to follow the status quo.

### **The Bloody Chamber**

In “The Bloody Chamber,” Carter’s Beauty-character is saved from her murderous husband by her family, and her mother is a revolver-wielding free spirit who swoops in at the last moment to save the day. She strikes a great balance between femininity and masculinity and sacrifices neither in favour of the other. In “When Sita Met Belle,” I have chosen to change the ending in my story based on “The Bloody Chamber” with the vampiric First Husband hanging his wife out to dry, literally. The First Husband strings up The Seventh Wife and drains her of her blood. Then he cuts off her tongue and leaves her voiceless in conveying her agony. The First Husband does this all after discovering that The Seventh Wife is pregnant. This story awakens a sense of urgency in Charu as she is also pregnant and voiceless.

The curiosity aspect of which much is said is the reason for the punishment of the previous Beauty-character in *Bluebeard*. The fairy tale advises caution and wariness, of checking one’s curiosity. I have re-visioned this as the reason the Bride chooses to marry her Beast. For me, curiosity should be fostered and is a vital part of growth and development. Those who have not developed a healthy curious appetite remain stunted in their knowledge and experience.

Whilst Carter uses mirrors in his quest to view his Bride, I have used portraits. The First Husband hangs a portrait of each wife in their bedroom. This act of hanging a portrait of each woman ties in to the theme of viewing beauty and women as being put on show. My choice of a portrait rather than a mirror was influenced by the *Mona Lisa*, a standard of beauty internationally held. Even though people across the globe know of this painting, there is nothing known about the woman behind the portrait. Hence, in admiring the painting, we are ignoring the actual painting. The subject of the painting has value only in our admiration of the painting. Similarly, the Bride views herself through the Marquis's gaze as it is reflected to her in the opera house, "I saw myself ... as he saw me" (Carter, 1979:6). Similarly, the paintings in "When Sita Met Belle" are commissioned by the husband and the reader is left to imagine when exactly they were painted, before or after the wives were locked away, or if they are portraits based purely on descriptions provided by the husband. The metaphor is further carried by The Seventh Husband actually hanging up his wives as one would a portrait.

The messages that Charu receives on her phone are, also, her Beast's description of her as she stumbles through the chapters trying to hold on to her own identity as her Beast, like the Marquis, continually dominates her, fracturing her identity in her own eyes. The Seventh Bride also stumbles through the rooms of The First Husband's house. The excitement that The First Husband exhibits as he takes The Seventh Bride through each room before entering the dark chamber behind the wine cellar can be seen as a kind of fever. It is domination and the power that comes with removing the power of another. The First Husband's insistence on The Seventh Bride wearing the wedding dress to supper each night is twofold. Firstly, he measures her stomach to ascertain the moment she becomes pregnant. Secondly, the dress is a form of restriction, physically and figuratively, like the necklace that the Marquis gifted to his Bride. The necklace is a collar and, like a collar, a form of domination and control. So, too, is the wedding dress in "When Sita Met Belle." The First Husband's wives are immortalised in their death poses still wearing their wedding dresses, the white cloth being marred with their blood and their identity as wives sacrificed as virginal brides are sacrificed to marriage.

The idea of white as a symbol of purity and virginity, of red as blood and a loss of that virginity is what I played with in “When Sita Met Belle,” whilst still using the red rose image that has become synonymous with the narrative. I have retained the rose motif as flowers are used to symbolise female purity and sexuality. For instance, when a girl loses her virginity, she is considered as deflowered. Andrea Frownfelter notes that this deflowering enables the girl to blossom into a woman (2010:28). The Bride in “The Bloody Chamber” also speaks of being born “away from Paris, away from girlhood, away from the white, enclosed quietude of my mother’s apartment, into the unguessable country of marriage” (Carter, 1979:1). When Charu walks into her bedroom and sees the red wedding attire<sup>39</sup> hanging up and reflecting into the mirror as if she is already wearing it, she muses on how apt the colour is for her, someone who has lost her virginity and is already with child.

In contrast, Charu begins the novella in grey clothing and white plimsolls that rapidly start to grey as she travels. Grey tends to be associated with old age, boredom and poverty. It is a colour lacking lustre; hence it represents a lacklustre life. This is in contrast to the bridal colours that Charu wears during the wedding week, brought starkly into focus when she accidentally meets a widow at her *mehndi* event. With the plimsolls, I considered the connotations of white representing purity. Grey, then, is an objective correlative of the experience. The turning of the white shoes to grey is how experience has affected Charu.

### **Bluebeard’s Egg**

I have made Charu’s husband-to-be a presence in the story but one that is pacing around the periphery because this is Charu’s story. Her fiancé has even less of a presence than middle-aged Ed in Atwood’s “Bluebeard’s Egg.” Ed flits in and out of “Bluebeard’s Egg” much to the befuddlement of his wife, Sally, who is unable to figure him out. She calls him a “heart man” (Atwood, 1983:160), but he is far from romantic. As a bored housewife, she desires more from the mundane existence that she has and has far-flung notions of being a princess in a fairy tale (Atwood, 1983:157), but her husband, like his counterpart in “When Sita Met Belle,” is not the

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<sup>39</sup> In Hindu custom, the bride traditionally wears red on her wedding day.



prince of the story. Instead, Ed is “a real person, with a lot more to him ... which sometimes worries her” (Atwood, 1983:158). Like the Belle-character is unable to figure out the Beast-character until it is almost too late and he lies dying in front of her, so too is Sally finding challenges in determining Ed’s “inner world” (Atwood, 1983:169) and Charu is unable to truly connect with her fiancé.

Atwood’s Sally is a strange protagonist. She is the middle-aged version of the housewife that the Belle-character begins to be. Whilst she is trying to crack open her husband’s inner world, Sally complains loudly about her husband not understanding love and romance. Charu’s complaints are silent but equally frustrating. It is in what she does not say that the reader finds the lack, or her romance empty. Yet when Atwood reveals Ed being sexually physical with Marylynn, this provides a twist for Sally as she begins to question her perspective. However, with Charu, the aim is more than simply to showcase her perspective but that of the ‘influencing others’ of society, religion, culture, gender and family, all of which act upon her and shape her by restrictions. The perspectives that she buys into, further played upon by her husband-to-be’s messages, affects her interpretation of events, namely of her behaviour, of her worth and of blame. That Charu would consider marriage to a man who clearly cares more for his reputation than her emotional state, shows how a skewed perspective can affected meaning and interpretation which, in turn, impacts on how we live our lives.

Just as Ed has an inner world which Sally “can’t get at” (Atwood, 1983:169), it is only fair to note that Charu’s husband-to-be has an inner world that the reader cannot truly ‘get at’ but which is unnecessary for the aim of “When Sita Met Belle.” Charu’s fiancé is even more of a “shadow” (Atwood, 1983:176) than Ed, however, a menacing one. There is no redeeming quality in the fiancé as there is in Villeneuve’s or Beaumont’s Beast. Instead, the Beast-character is split in two; between the fiancé and Bartholomew. The reader may be left to wonder whether Barry is that better version of the Beast, the prince that the Beast transforms into after his ‘death.’<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> The Beast’s death is the breaking of the curse that turned him into such a hideous creature in the first place.

Just as Sally wonders what will happen next, so too does Charu and the reader, by extension. This is what stories are meant to do; to expand our imagination and have us carry on the characters' lives in our imaginations, playing out all sorts of scenarios for us to better understand the world and to better the world. This is meant to be a hopeful wonder but it is no easy task. We are provided with explanations for Charu's actions, for her fiancé's threats having the impact that they do and for the silence and complaints of the women in the story. These explanations may be easily digested by readers, as unpalatable as they may be, because the themes and patterns encoded therein are known and have been observed. Yet these observations and knowledge may be limited as they may exist and operate within the societal and cultural arenas of a certain group. This, then, is part of the problem, especially in the context in which I place Charu or to which any feminist rewriting speaks. A re-vision, then, gives them an alternative solution to this problem.

### **Disney's Evolution of the Fairy Tale**

The impact of the Disney vehicle severely cuts down the initial message of the *Beauty and the Beast* narrative. Instead of preparing young ladies for arranged marriages, it focuses on the notion of beauty being more than skin deep ... and, then, contradicts itself. For instance, the Beast is meant to be depicted as hideous and a terror, yet he transforms into a handsome prince. This, then, undercuts the message of the film and influences other adaptations across the board. Even in the recent adaptation of *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) with Emma Watson,<sup>41</sup> the Beast-character is an emo-Goth whose tattoos do little to distract from the traditional blonde-and-blue eyed notions of handsomeness. In addition, Belle is beautiful. It would be a far better retelling to have a story with an ugly Belle and see how that narrative develops. The idea, then, would be that neither Belle nor the Beast would have to change for a pretty, picture-perfect moment of love.

The Beauty-character's outward appearance is not her defining feature, despite her name. The moral of the story should be inner beauty but that does not stop writers such as Benjamin Tabart from extolling Beauty as "handsomer than her sisters"

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<sup>41</sup> This film was a product of CBS Films.

(Tabart, 1827:95). Tabart further describes his Beauty-character as “better tempered ... [but being constantly teased for] spending her time in reading” (1827:95). This detail of the story has been carried forward and further developed in Disney’s animated film and Condon’s 2017 version. Even in the *Once Upon A Time* (2011) series, Belle serves as the town’s librarian and rescues her community with the knowledge gleaned from her books.

The alteration of fairy tales into children’s stories, with the Disney initiative taking the lead, has done much to obscure the original intentions of the narrative. Initially serving as warnings, fairy tales have evolved into character building guides. Laura Fry Kready notes that important “moments of decision [making] will come into the lives of all when no amount of reason will be a sufficient guide ... [Fairy tales] will begin the reason of a fortress of ideals which will support the true feeling and lead constantly to noble action” (1916:9). The adaptation of fairy tales for children continues by Disney, diluting and diverting the original messages that were purposeful in intent. Marie-Louise von Franz saw that the fairy tale is its own explanation with its meaning contained in a relatively closed system, but which is “expressed in a series of symbolical pictures and events and is discoverable in these,” she goes a step further to express that whilst fairy tales “endeavour to describe one and the same psychic fact [ ... ] hundreds of tales and thousands of repetitions with a musician’s variation are needed until this unknown fact is delivered into the consciousness” (1970:1). A re-visioning can do two things. It can reaffirm the original story or it can make the message of the story more aligned to the contemporary audience.

With technological advances in animation and special effects, fairy tales have been delivered to their audience in magical and believable ways onscreen. Disney’s trademark and most well-known endeavours have been with fairy tale adaptations. Disney’s 1937 feature-length film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, was revolutionary (Grant and Clute, 1997:196). With *Cinderella* in 1950, *Sleeping Beauty* in 1959 and *Beauty and the Beast* in 1991, fairy tales had become Disney’s trump card. Disney, as well, played no small part in cementing the fairy tale genre as the arena of children. However, this meant softening the edges of some stories and creating pro-social outcomes and opening up a space for ‘feel-good’ films ending

with sublime moments of catharsis. Although various adaptations, before and beyond Disney, often splice and dice or play hard and fast with the narratives, Disney has had a massive amount of influence in establishing fairy tales as the genre and arena for children, and creating the expectations of the 'happily ever after.'

Yet this softening of the fairy tales, a detraction from the realism of the tales and the unhappy conclusions, occurred even before Disney waved its particular brand and franchise, including changes made by the Grimm brothers (Tatar, 1987:24). Thus, the precedent was set and Disney embarked on a venture to capitalise upon it. *Once Upon A Time* (2011) took intertextuality to another level by combining fairy tales, folk tales, Disney and other animated films into one series. Part of the diversion from staid fairy tales was the lack of damsels-in-distress and the provision of female characters who had the power to save themselves, their families and their love interests. The biggest break with stereotypes was in fleshing out the villains and giving them pain, challenges and goodness that they could use to overcome their struggles and be seen as heroic. Such complexities and dynamism empowered the female characters and the lesser known characters, making audiences invest in their wellbeing for seven seasons. The show is written in the same vein as Atwood's and Carter's heroines. They are strong women, active in their agencies and flawed in their realism.

### **The Need to Escape**

One of the leading links between the stories, as well as the following versions by Carter and Atwood, is that of the husband as an animal. The message behind this metaphor from a 'softened' standpoint is to look beyond the surface and into a person's true nature. Once the Beauty-character is able to accomplish this, she is rewarded with her 'happily ever after.' In "When Sita Met Belle," the Beast-character is an ordinary man which entails that an external transformation is not needed. Thus, it is more difficult for the Beauty-character to identify him as a Beast. I feel this is a more contemporary notion, one in which women are sometimes swept into marriages and find out the true natures of their spouses thereafter. An internal transformation is needed not from the Beast but from the Beauty-characters.

Atwood and Carter negotiate these changes in their Belle-characters, a break from the fairy tale to which we are accustomed. Carter's rewriting interests me more. Her creation of a Belle-character is more sexually bestial. Whilst it is a worthy notion not to judge a person based on appearances, physical or financial, the initial endeavour of the fairy tale still has value but would need re-visioning for the modern audience. Hence, "When Sita Met Belle" is not just a fractured fairy tale, by operating on a role reversal of the male and female characters. One of the reasons behind this is that by simply reversing the roles of the genders, none of the challenges faced by women are resolved. Instead of giving one solutions, it gives one substitution. In such a case, the qualities that a writer takes from a male character to invest in a female character are not of equal power. For instance, charisma and ambition are noteworthy or admirable with regard to the male characters (Sage, 2001:67), however, they are misconstrued and 'read wrong' when developed in a female character. What is needed is, in fact, an addressing of the patriarchal ideologies in which these characters are mired.

From such a viewpoint, I kept to the idea of a male Beast and female Beauty but woven together with cultural, social and psychological bindings that influence behaviour and emotion, culminating in the character of Charu and her decision to break free by leaving her wedding in mid-events. The only alternative, otherwise, is submission. In her case, marriage is not just a cage in which to keep her femininity on display as Aishwarya discussed, because her entire relationship had been one of confinement. Thus, by the choice that she has been given, she can be her own jailor or lockpicker. This conflict that she undergoes is echoed in the stories of the other women, with Charu picking from them her means to escape. This sharing of experiences is the internal transformative motivation and that is the power and influence of stories catering for and speaking to their audience and their times or predicaments. The tenacity of fairy tales and the perseverance of the narratives, despite adaptations, show the value of continuing this trend but with a more specific purpose, hence the necessity of a re-visioning of the tale.

When a society changes, the conventions that were previously accepted without much question face being reviewed (Francis quoted in Crew, 2002: 77). A re-vision

can act as this review and provide usefulness in this regard. It can be used as a vehicle by feminist writers in which to drive away from the past of patriarchy. I use the word 'feminist' to apply to both male and female writers but believe that female writers are able to create a more detailed or explicit feminist re-visioning of fairy tales, dependent on their society, culture, upbringing and awareness. Kuykendall and Sturm argue that women should be executors of such endeavours as the mother-child bond is the originating point for fairy tales and it is in the oral tradition that manifested from the mother-child bond (2007:39-40). Yet to exclude male writers from this experience is to deprive the audience and future re-visions of potential development.

It is, also, interesting to see the other gender's perspective as insight, and react or engage with it for further re-visions, yet we must be aware of the difference. For me as a child, and even as an adult embarking on this project, male writers and story tellers were the initial springboard and resources. The Brothers Grimm and Charles Perrault are the most widely disseminated pieces of work in my childhood and ones to which I still mentally refer when considering fairy tales. Only later did Carter and Atwood appear on my radar but, for a younger me, they were more subversive. They were not the fairy tales that I knew, that I trusted but, at a certain point, a switch flicked and these were the ones that I preferred. If such a phenomenon is true for me then I must acknowledge that there are women like me who are part of the audience still referring to the Grimm Brothers and Perrault but wanted more. It is from female storytellers that such tales offering 'more' have arisen and could still arise, which entails that female writers should be at the vanguard of feminist rewritings of fairy tales instead of the genre falling to masculine appropriation. With Atwood and Carter rewriting fairy tales with a feminist twist, they have highlighted sexism, gender coding, patriarchy and female subjugation to ideologies historically biased against them and presented in story form. Any rewriting, then, is an eye-opening experiment which is able to make the reader actively participate in evaluating these "ideologically harmless" fairy tales (Koshy, 2010:81). If the old tales assist in continuing the traditions and notions that are no longer applicable to the audience and the time, then they are nothing more than dusty relics and a change must be made. My fear is that these tales may act in reverse and flick a different switch, one which ushers in

further patriarchy whose grip would be irrefutable if the audience believes in the charm of the fairy tale rather than its message.

Stories in general, and fairy tales in specific, are their own brand of magic. The connection that we feel with a narrative, its events, messages and characters is equal to the power it has to remove us from the minutiae of our own lives. Yet such an occurrence is accomplished when the content, themes and characters are tailored for the audience in which the story is presented. The latest royal wedding buzz between Meghan Markle and Prince Harry shows two things. Whilst contemporary women are aware that the fairy tale dream of marrying a prince is a fanciful notion, indulged in whimsical thought, Markle, herself, did not follow the code of behaviours and patterns that culminated in such an outcome. As a divorced woman of mixed heritage, different nationality, exotic features, a dubious past and family history and who starred in series about scandal, fraud and corruption in which she filmed scenes of a sexual nature (Mahfouz, 2018:246), she would fit more the traditional villain role than the sweet, amicable and docile damsel-made-princess. As fact follows fiction and fiction follows fact, the very real events prove that a realistic re-visioning is warranted.

The fairy tale has proven tenacious because of its adjustments. Yet *Sri Ramacharitamansa* has been relatively staid. The reasoning behind this, I believe, hinges on one being accepted as a fairy tale and the other a religious text. However, both are stories with the power to influence. Both, in their characteristics of the lead female character, have the ability to perpetuate patriarchal themes and code them as moral, to justify submission by promoting certain behaviours over others. For this reason, the narrative must be re-visioned to speak to the times, to survive in a climate of gender awareness, difference and global movements such as #MeToo.

Sita has her own relevance in the time of #MeToo. After being kidnapped by Ravana, she faced public shame as her husband and the people of Ayodhya mistrusted her fidelity. Both Rama and the washerman questioned whether Sita had been chaste during her time spent in Ravana's kingdom. Even though Tulsidasa does not mention any sexual violence, Rama and his people did not see her as a victim. Instead, they saw the shame that Sita could bring to Rama if she had been

abused by Ravana. What the modern woman can take away from Sita's stoic stand is that she did not back down when questioned. She braved death threats from Ravana and she had a sense of moral righteousness to withstand the *agniparaksha* because she knew her value was not a commodity and her reputation was not a currency.

In *Don't Bet on the Prince* (1979), Zipes's recollection of the origins and functions of feminist fairy tales considers the unhappiness with the dominating male discourse in the traditional narratives that carved the structures to house sexism, female submission, patriarchal cultural expectations and maternal marginalisation. In contrast, feminist fairy tales shout through this house with a voice historically ignored or silenced and draws attention to oppression and subordination (Zipes, 2012:xi) thus destabilising the narrative with which we are familiar. I placed the last chapter in which Charu finds her voice in her childhood home. Charu considers the photographs hung on the wall and thinks that her "life had been laid out in print from the first black and white bath in the green tub, now discarded in the backyard, to the last explosion of colour of the engagement party" (Chundhur, 2019:61). These photographs that show the progression of her life have never been moved or changed:

"Even had the curtains been drawn and the house plunged in darkness, I would have known where each photograph had been placed. There had been no movement in that home, no change, like the vase that sat in the middle of the window or the doily that had been placed under it. Even life had moved around it" (Chundhur, 2019:61).

In effect, Madhuri has silenced her own voice as well that of her daughter. Her sister points this out by saying, "Our parents, our family, sometimes the entire community, try to wrap us in tissue paper and keep its daughters safe" (Chundhur, 2019:82). It is only when the sisters "laughed, reaching out for each other ... [entwining] their hands, their hearts, their memories" (Chundhur, 2019:83) that I tried to bring a oneness between women instead of rivalry, of breaking out of the idea of women perpetuating patriarchy and living by its standards.



This, then, is the crux of re-visioning as I imagined it to be. A re-vision would revisit the silence of women, it would rewrite established patterns and break patriarchal restrictions bringing awareness of the positive and negative notions upon which gender and society operate. Children grow up and this process is twofold. Firstly, they age and take with them into adulthood the roadmap provided for them in their stories. Secondly, they grow out of their childhoods and start to question the directions of the roadmap. It is at this point, if not before, that a re-vision can step in. The re-vision can connect its audience to a common past but, simultaneously, set the foundation for a new future. The world is not static, meaning is fluid and we need stories that are dynamic and not staid.

## Conclusion

This chapter summarises the necessity of updating and re-visioning fairy tales. It recaps the hope that I have of female agency coming to the fore in stories, the importance of stories and the influence of Carter and Atwood in changing the narrative of fairy tales. The fairy tale of *Beauty and the Beast* was chosen as fairy tales provide conduits for a vast array of endeavours fashioned by their creators. From exploring the human condition, discussing modern issues or serving as warnings, fairy tales have certain motives such as that of critiquing the older narratives and, in doing so, re-evaluating the content and its messages.

To this end, I hope to not only see the agency of women come into play through stories by the minor characters within the overarching story of Charu's journey but through the inner workings of her mind and emotions. It would have been easier for Charu to abandon her fiancé because she is unhappy but her happiness is not in play. Instead, Charu decides to break free of her restrictions for another female person, her daughter. I believe that female agency can be endorsed by stories and storytelling. I believe that restrictive stereotypes can be broken by re-visioning old tales. I believe that a person, whether child or adult, can find a transformative moment in reading a story or telling it.

The world has changed a lot since the telling of the first story. Yet authors and storytellers have always had the opportunity to manipulate plots, characters, settings and dialogue to push an agenda or highlight an aspect close to their hearts. In a re-visioning, the audience gets a voice even if it is simply to point out a more authentic commonality. In this way, the audience feels more connected to the story. This feeling enables empowerment and empowerment is key to activating agency.

Differentiating between the male focus and female focus is a relatively new phenomenon. Bringing awareness to it now, will only increase its impact further into the future. My hope is that one day there will not be a male gaze or female gaze, that stories with a patriarchal bias would not be the traditional stories and that meaning would be created based on interpretation and identification. I do not wish to overhaul the past. I contend that stories are important but that a re-vision would lend real

world credence to what a story can offer to its audience. A story should not be just a fancy narrative but should enable introspection and give perspective on events and situations. The audience will not be able to engage with a story in isolation. It is a marvellous aspect of human existence that enables one to invest a story with one's own experiences, thoughts, beliefs and interpretations. Thus, stories are powerful tools with which one can make meaning, find value and notions similar or dissimilar from one's own, establish superiority and inferiority or create equality. Stories can create their own norms and once these take hold in the general mindset, they are hard to break. Meaning is subjective, it resides in the reader's experiences, emotions and mindset. However, it does present information and information gives rise to ideas and validates personal truths.

This dissertation has engaged in a re-visioning of the *Beauty and the Beast* fairy tale from a modern feminist point of view incorporating elements from *Sri Ramacharitamanasa*. The aim is to encourage female agency when it appeared lacking in the female protagonists of Belle and Sita, respectively. This aim was accessed by Rich's re-visioning theory which breaks out of stereotypical female characterisations and traditional endings. It is also used to incorporate a different rewards system. The writers prolific in this arena are Atwood and Carter who have re-visited well-known fairy tales and influenced the genre. Both writers deal with re-writing fairy tales and focusing on the female gaze without subjecting their works to patriarchal bias. Textual analysis is used as the best possible way to understand experiential meaning, the impact of relationships, emotional development and responses.

A re-vision is necessary. The world is fragmenting and experiences are changing. A re-vision benefits this new audience. It also reinvigorates the genre and encourages women forward. Of the two genders, only one can truly encapsulate and convey the female experience in a creative and positive expression. The fairy tale of *Beauty and the Beast* and the Hindu text of *Sri Ramacharitamanasa* enjoy the fact that both are quite adaptable to the times and never out of favour. It would be interesting to see if anyone would sweep clean the old fairy tale cupboard and start afresh with new fairy tales but for the purposes of this dissertation, I engaged with a re-vision of the

*Beauty and the Beast* narrative. In effect, such a re-vision must make heroes of heroines.

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