

SHE said, "Raising a daughter is like watering a flower in someone else's garden."

My sister's face was set. Her tired, stony eyes looked straight up. The hospital bed in which she lay was soaked with the sweat of her labour. The late afternoon sun slanted through an open window, illuminating the huge room in a gloomy orange. It was not my sister's favourite time of day.

"That's a Hindu saying, you know," she said, not averting her eyes from the ceiling, not even blinking.

"No it's not," I said, hoping an argument would bring her back.

"Yes. Yes it is. Amaji kept saying that right before they admitted me. I

remember. I remember." There was a catch in her throat, a rough crackling which found its physical expression in two tiny tears running down either cheek.

In the dying sunlight they looked like two orange marbles rolling along. They reminded me of how Gita and I used to take our shiny marbles outdoors and play with the street children. And Papa would scold us, ordering us back into the house. But now that I think about it, the scolding was subtly different between us, I was supposed to be studying and Gita was supposed to be acting like a lady, helping Mummy.

I never thought about that then; scolding was scolding. But the subtleties accumulated like sediments settling on an ocean bed. Now, sitting here beside my sister, I find that those accumulated subtleties have somehow formed a wall between us, on the one side lies man, and on the other woman. And the difference is not just one of biology.

I remember the subtleties like how Gita could not go out to play alone, I

would have to accompany her; how Gita was expected to mind the kitchen, while I helped entertain; how singing and make-up were forbidden to her because that would make her a prostitute; how after high school, Gita's next step was naturally marriage, while mine was of course college; and how I was encouraged to speak my mind, as Gita was being cajoled into demure silence.

But now watching these two orange marbles run down my sister's face, I can only cling to the memory of playing with forbidden children. So I say, "Remember when we used to play marbles with the street children, and Papa would yell at us?"

The memory seemed to tug at some dusty corner in her mind because with a questioning gaze, she said, "So?"

"And remember how you would convince me to go back outside by saying, 'What Papa doesn't know won't hurt him?'"

"So?"

"And then we would sneak out of the back door for another round of marbles?"

A New Flower



"I remember. So what?" The corners of her mouth were thin lines because she was straining hard not to smile at the thought of her past rebellions.

"Oh, I don't know- something reminded me of it."

"You're a fool," she said, and laughed despite herself.

In a few moments her smile faded and in quick hushed tones she said, "Amit, what will I do? Amaji and he so much wanted a boy." 'He' was my sister's husband- she never spoke his name.

"Hmm. Well, I don't know. I hope you know that your mother-in-law is a wicked old woman."

"But she's not really," Gita said.

"-who's so full of silly superstitions that no one should bother with her."

"You can say that- and it might be half-true," she whispered, "but I have to live with her."

"I really can't believe this. So you've given birth to a girl. It's not your fault- it should be a cause for celebration. And, anyway, half of the fault is his." For some reasons I found myself whispering also.

"But you know how it is with them, a girl is like a burden."

"That's ridiculous," I exclaimed.

"Why he even tried to tell me how a girl is like an investment that yields no profits."

"That baboon!"

"I know, but," she added, letting out a bit of a sigh, "sometimes I think they may be right."

"You can't possibly believe that garbage?"

"Well, look at me. Did Papa and Mummy clothe, feed and educate me just so I could cook and clean in another's house? At least you are earning money and can look after them, but I can do nothing for them."

"Oh, that's all wrong," I said. But it wasn't completely, and knowing it, I turned away. Half-mumbling, I said,

"You really shouldn't listen to your Amaji- she's from a different era."

"You can't know what it's like," she said, her voice catching again. "She kept me up for two nights telling me what they used to do to girl babies in the villages. When I asked her why boys were so much more valuable, she just looked at me as if I were the crazy one."

"Gita," I whispered close to her ear, "maybe we could slip her some poison."

She laughed, and said, "You forget I'm a Gandhian. But ohh, when she told me about that 'Flower-in-Another -Garden' saying, I really thought I would go crazy."

Searching for something profound to say, I awkwardly declared, "You know, Gita, no matter where the flower is, it is always beautiful." The words sounded so stupid, I felt like hitting myself.

Closing her eyes, Gita sighed reluctantly, "I suppose so."

My trite attempt at altering the saying hadn't worked and we lapsed into silence. As if by chance, I noticed the sun had set, and in its place the dull glow from three huge tubelights buffeted the room in erratic waves. From somewhere down the hall, a tortured cough and a baby's shrill cry sent a mingled echo to fill our silence.

I recall wishing that I could erase

that saying from Gita's mind and destroy the thousand year old idiocy on which it fed. But instead, I dozed. And suddenly, I found an insistent nurse trying to nudge me awake. The night had passed, giving way to a brilliant yellow sun which seemed to burst into the room. Gita was in another bed, all changed and looking new. She was flanked on either side by her mother-in-law and her husband. They were both smiling vaguely and fussing over Gita.

And in her arms was this little person, wrapped in a soft, blue cloth. The baby's tiny hands played with Gita's face. Her huge black eyes were wet as if she had just stopped crying. Now her eyes were fixed attentively on her mother. And Gita was quietly laughing.

"So here she is," I said. Amaji's smile weakened and she nodded. But Gita replied, "She is more beautiful than I imagined." Everyone chimed their agreement.

"Have you thought of a name?" I asked, looking at her husband.

Before he could say anything, Gita replied, "Yes, I think I want to name her Pushpa."

"That's pretty," I said. "What does it mean?"

Smiling at me, she said firmly, "Pushpa means 'Flower.'"

A newborn female baby, aged less than a week was found amidst water hyacinth in a pond beside Serampore station. Some local young men rescued the baby and came to Serampore *thana* along with the baby. Since none came forward to take the responsibility of the abandoned baby, a maid-servant Mrs Swapna Bhattacharya, took the baby to her residence in Baidyabati at Chak-Goalpara. Mrs Bhattacharya has a son and a daughter. She said her husband was a rickshaw puller.

It was about 5.30 p.m. A faint cry was heard by some passers by at Zamindar Bagan or Jhil Bagan. It was also ascertained that the sound was coming from a pond covered with water hyacinth. Since nothing could be located from the side of the pond, a young man stepped into the pond and found the baby.

There was no garment on its body, except a small piece of bandage around its navel chord. A little blood was oozing out from its navel cavity. It appeared that the baby was thrown into the pond but as the water hyacinth acted like a cushion the baby neither drowned nor was hurt.

Amrita Bazar Patrika. August 15, 1990.