

Unheard Voices

A Poem in Three Sections

by Sutapa Chaudhuri (December 2015)

I

I'm the formless foetus you aborted, Mother,
when yesterday, at the ultrasonography clinic,
the doctor told you I'd be a girl...your third.
You sank in shame on the low plastic stool;
your guilt-ridden face hidden in your palms.

I could spy father's fury spewing forth—
his drunk eyes, red in rage, engulfed
in utter incomprehension, his precious virility
at stake. Back at home, amidst the clamorous
din of a slowly disintegrating joint family,

I could hear grandma shrieking abuses—
blaming your inauspicious signs,
keening harshly for a lost line of sons.

My sisters cowered, fists clenched, throats

choked, bemoaning their scanty lives.

Reverberating with the forlorn sighs
of a hundred unborn girls, the damp walls
of the mansion, derelict and dispassionate,
deliberated yet again a pre-meditated
cold-blooded crime committed for centuries.

A strange grating noise echoed eerie
through the silent hallways, haunted
by the ghosts of the past; the present and
the future held in abeyance. Their tearless,
dumbstruck eyes dilated in fear as the bloated

milk-fed infants drowned and floated
in tubs of milk lugged forward in sinister rituals.
Their anguished wails, lonely and muted,
trapped within its impenetrable walls—
the sole witness to a hundred hushed up crimes.

I curled into you then, Mother, tight like a ball

clinging for protection in the tender warmth

of your generous womb, the ruthless world at bay.

They laid me out on a kidney basin
instead—

the cold steel scorching my nascent warm body,

my pink fledgling skin all a-wrinkle,

my unformed mouth voiceless,

yet gaping wide, as if trying to shape
words;

my lacerated, still-beating heart

merely an unnoticed medical curiosity.

You looked happy then, Mother,

gazing with relief at my momentarily

quivering body, a bloody mass

on a surgical dish: forever homeless, yet

forever haunting the precincts of a spectral love.

II

I'm the docile daughter who'll burn again, Mother,
in your kitchen fires. The handsome dowry
that accompanied me so pompously on my marriage,
a meagre nothing to your lustful, greedy eyes.

Soon on some sultry summer afternoon,
the mediocre kerosene stove will burst out,
suddenly, in all consuming irreverent flames.
The wild impudence of its all-taming passion

lopsided and incongruous in the rich décor—
the posh interiors of your modular kitchen,
amidst the next-gen gadgets and sparkling
dinnerware. Absorbed in their dusty files,

forever overburdened with cases of blatant
dowry-deaths, honour-killings, rapes and
molestations, the significance of sudden,
impromptu fires in modern kitchens loses

colour in a mildewed verbosity. Dutifully,
the police thus records yet again, 'A case

of unprecedented accident at home one

fine summer afternoon while pumping

the out-dated kerosene stove to boil water...'

all culpability cannily camouflaged in florid

records, devious connivers in a complacent crime—

your gleeful faces will belie the deadly lie nonchalant;

no
asked.

questions

III

I'm the daughter whose shadowy face

scars the pristine news media and family breakfasts

every morning; whose absent presence haunts

the myriad women commission reports—

agendas-on-priority, talk shows, expert discussions,

opinion polls, mobile apps and 'support' groups.

I'm the docile daughter whose defiled body
hangs raped from a tree, the aspiring teenager
left bloody and naked by the lonely roadside,

mauled by a gang of marauding men.

I'm that raped child of five huddling
desperately in a school classroom holding

my tongue and precarious, bloody insides.

I'm the silent mother, whose beloved
daughters are burnt alive for dowry;

whose proud sons sever boldly
the heads of their transgressing sisters,
merely to uphold the fragile family honour.

I'm that girl whose sisters, in silent anguish,
put on an array of costly cosmetics to hide
the daily bruises that darken with pain

their inscrutable kohl lined eyes; whose cousins
vanish without a trace: sold off to the lure

of foreign lucre. I'm that suffering wife whose

malnourished sister dies birthing in some

obscure alley yearning only for a son

to grace her lap. The tormented victim

of a yearly ritual, whose infant girls die

smothered in tubs of milk, cruel lumps

of salt pushed down choking their tiny throats.

I'm the same mother, ancient or young,

sold off, beaten up, defiled and prostituted,

burnt, murdered, swapped or abandoned.

I'm the same woman, the same as you are.

Sutapa Chaudhuri has two poetry collections – *Broken Rhapsodies* and *Touching Nadir. My Lord, My Well-Beloved* is a collection of her translations of Rabindranath Tagore's songs.

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