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ISSN: 2278-9529



GALAXY
International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Vol. 7, Issue-II March 2018

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Refugee

Original Odia Story: Chandrasekhar Dasburma
(Odisha Sahitya Akademi and Central Sahitya Akademi award winner)

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The golden rays of the rising sun coming through the long line of dense deodar trees grew warmer. The cement bench lying at the foot of the trees was the place where Moseen slept. At times, he went to the hut by the side of the road. There he would find his friends. But for most of the year, he took rest on this bench.

By the time Moseen opened his eyes, it was already very late. He didn't sleep soundly the previous night. So, he got up late today. Smoke emanated from the huts by the side of the road. Perhaps people had left for work. Moseen cast a glance on all the cement benches lying in the huge park. No one was visible. Today, Dada would surely scold him. He had been working in Maheshda's shop for the last five years. After he had left home, he came to Maheshda's shop, served tea and tiffin, washed utensils, and cleaned the hotel. He got his lunch and dinner for free. The salary that he got was sufficient for him. Chittapur was a crowded area in Kolkata. The park on Rabindrakanan Road of this area was the home of many people like Moseen.

Moseen belonged to Bangladesh. He didn't know where his parents lived. He only knew that his father had two wives. Moseen's mother was his first wife; she was extremely beautiful. Moseen's father owned a motor garage. He drank too much at night. One night, his mother left home in the absence of his father. After that, his father brought another woman to live in the house. Unable to bear the tortures of his mother, Moseen, one night, crossed the Bangladesh border and sneaked into West Bengal.

Since then, the park had become his home and Maheshda's shop his place of work. He had never wished to return to his motherland. However, he remembered his mother at times. Tears would well up in his eyes then. While he worked in the shop, his mother's beautiful figure would flash before his eyes. He would forget himself for some time. He felt he had never seen another beautiful woman like his mother since the day he had gained consciousness. Moseen had never come in close contact with other women. Whenever he saw women dining in Maheshda's restaurant, he would unconsciously compare them with his mother. Five years had passed like this.



Perhaps he would lose his hard-earned job today. By the time he completed his ablutions and reached the shop, customers had already gathered there. While he entered the shop from the backside frightfully, he bumped into Shyamali. Shyamali shouted, “Hey, you. Why are you entering from the backside like a thief? Wait, Papa will throw you out of job today.” Moseen held Shyamali’s hand and entreated her, “Shyamali, please save me today. Otherwise Dada would...” Shymali stopped him and said, “It’s o.k. You do one thing. I am taking your Dada inside. I’ll tell him while Moseen was coming to the shop hurriedly, he stumbled against a stone and sprained his leg. So he got late in reaching here. Will you walk with a limp?”

Moseen held the hands of Shyamali tightly, walked inside the shop imitating a perfect limp, and started working. After some time Maheshda came and found Moseen really limping. He thought, “Aha! The poor boy has left his parents far away. He may not meet them again. Really, the boy can work very hard.”

Moseen had collected the information that Maheshda also belonged to Bangladesh. During the Indo-Pak war he left Bangladesh. He had one loving daughter named Shyamali. Dada fondly called her Shyama. Shyama and Moseen were agemates. She was fifteen years of age. She had a pretty figure, nose like that of a parrot, curly hair, attractive eyes, pink lips, well developed neck, teeth like pearls. Lotus bloomed when she walked. Moseen would often compare her with her mother. Shyama had befriended him. During the day Maheshda would retreat to an inner chamber for rest. A small hut had been constructed at the back of the hotel. That was Maheshda’s rest place. Moseen would take rest in the outer room. Shyamali would arrive there. Sitting face to face with each other, they would open Grandma’s bag of stories. Moseen would tell her about his parents in Bangladesh; Shyamali would talk about her family. She would talk about how her father had to work hard during the last five or six years to run the shop successfully. Shyamali had to leave her education midway to help her father in running his business. She and her mother would cut and grind things; the specialist-workmen would do the frying. Her father had really grown very tired of working so hard for so many years. Maheshda’s hotel was renowned in the neighbourhood; so, customers gathered here in large numbers. Maheshda would never mind the friendly discussions between Moseen and Shyamali. He knew pretty well that there was no body else to befriend his only daughter.

During their discussions, Moseen would reveal the story of his sad life. He would say, “Shyamali, when you go away after your marriage, who would listen to the stories of my sad life? I will feel distressed as I will have to suppress my sadness. I will be rendered alone once again. When the mind will search for some comforting rest after the hard day’s work, you will not be there by my side. Our friendship will come to an end. You will belong to another person then.” With a shrug of her shoulder, Shyamali would retort, “In that case, I will talk to father. I will never get married. Who will talk to me? Who will share my feelings? You are my only friend.”



Moseen would gaze at the star-studded sky when he returned to the park at night after completing his tasks. He would think of his home. His mother's face would appear before him. Really, his mother was extremely beautiful. Just like Shyamali. Besides Shyamali, he had seen no one else whose beauty matched with that of his mother. But, can Shyamali become his own? Their caste, creed and religion differed. He was a Pathan whereas Shyamali was a Bengali Hindu. Long-lasting friendship between them wasn't at all possible. Tear drops would appear in Moseen's eyes. He would console himself after some time thinking such wild thoughts made no sense. Shyamali would gradually dissipate from his mind and his eyelids would close in sleep.

One day Maheshda had to go out. He asked Moseen to manage the hotel. From morning till evening, Moseen had to move hither and thither like a kitten. He had to do everything starting from serving the customers to managing the cash. His hardwork almost paralysed his limbs. Maheshda had increased his workload; in keeping with his work, his salary had also been raised. Of course, Moseen enjoyed his job. He was swift in his work. So, everybody was satisfied with him. Moseen returned to the room at the rear at about two o'clock after all the customers had gone. Shyamali, as usual, arrived there with his lunch served on a plate. She didn't talk much. She remained silent, glum. The face of the girl who smiled on the slightest pretext, had lost its charm. It was as if something unpleasant had happened.

"What's the matter, Shyama? Why are you so silent today? Has your mother rebuked you?"

"No."

"Why has the smile vanished then?... Are you not feeling well?" asked Moseen taking Shyamali's hand in his own.

"Something has surely happened."

"No. it's nothing."

"You have to speak up."

"Papa has gone out today."

"He usually goes out once every week. What harm is there? How would we manage without groceries and other things?"

"Yes, I understand; but today he has gone out on a different mission."

"What's that mission, Shyamali?"

"Last night, my parents were discussing things."

"What do you mean? What's new in that?"

Shyamali said, "Moseen, you are a fool. You don't understand anything. They were discussing about my marriage."

"What's wrong in that? You have grown up. It's their duty to look for a suitable match for you."

Shyamali burst into tears this time. Moseen clearly understood that Shyamali would go far away from him after marriage. Perhaps, they would not be able to meet each other.

Tear drops welled up in Moseen's eyes. In a heavy voice he said, "Why didn't you reject the proposal? I don't think you are that grown up."



“Where is the opportunity for me to speak? Mother says, I look older than my age. Tell me Moseen, do I look like a girl ready for marriage?”

For the first time in his life, Moseen gazed intently at Shyamali. Truly, an extremely beautiful woman, in the form of Shyamali, stood in front of him. Moseen, overwhelmed by emotion, pulled her towards him. Shyamali leaned on him without any protest. Both of them wept inconsolably. Shyamali, continuing to weep, said, “Do you know? It’s the second marriage for the groom. He has children from the first wife. He will pay Papa fifty thousand rupees to buy me. He says he will make me a queen. He will swing me on the swing in his palace. He will make me sleep on a golden bed.”

“Then, it’s very nice. You will stay there happily.”

“Say what you like, Moseen, but I’ll never get married to this old groom. I’ll rather commit suicide.”

Moseen burst into tears and said, “If you don’t agree to the proposal, tell your father so.”

“Moseen, will you keep my word?”

“What do you want to say?”

“Let’s leave this house and run away this night. Far away from papa and mama ... into a distant mountain... into a jungle. There we’ll build a hut to stay. You will carry logs from the jungle; I’ll cook for you. You’ll earn wages; I’ll cook and sit in wait for you. Papa and Mama have given birth to me, but they don’t possess my heart. One can buy this body for fifty thousand rupees but not this heart. This heart says, ‘Shyamali, run far away with Moseen.’” This time Moseen could figure out what Shyamali was saying. He said, “Shyamali, if your parents learn that I have eloped with you, will I remain alive? Besides, your parents have given me life. How would I betray their trust in me? Also, I am a Muslim you are a Hindu. Our caste and religion are different. Is it possible we can ever marry each other?”

Shyamali looked at Moseen with eyes moist with tear and said, “Our hearts have been knotted together. It’s not easy to untie the knot. We don’t believe in the distinctions of caste and religion. You are a human being; I am a human being too. We have grown up together. We have revealed our secrets to each other. Nowhere it is written that you are a Muslim and I am a Bengali. Neither have you read the Muslim’s Koran nor have I read the Hindu’s Gita. Till today, we have performed our duties only. Duty is our religion. There’s no space for caste or religion. Is it one’s dharma to marry an elderly person of one’s father’s or uncle’s age? Should it be construed as adharma to declare a person whom I know and understand, my own? answer me, Moseen. Is it ethical for us to submit to tyranny of my parents? If they proceed with the proposal to marry me off to an already-married person, I’ll surely commit suicide.”

Moseen was clueless. On one hand was Shyamali, whereas on the other hand was Maheshda. One had given him life but the other conquered his heart. Whose words should he obey? Who



should he leave? Caught in a cobweb, Moseen felt restless. Shyamali's words were novel but seemed true. He wasn't in a position to take a decision. Words betrayed even if he tried to speak. He didn't at all feel like working in the hotel in the evening. His heart felt very heavy. He tried to keep himself distanced from Shyamali but irrespective of that he felt as if Shyamali was repeating that question. Somehow he closed the shop at night and returned to the resting place in the park. It was as if Shyamali's ghost was pursuing him. He lay outstretched on the bench. Stars appeared inconspicuous that night. The sky looked glum and it indicated the possibility of a heavy downpour any time. Moseen couldn't sleep. His eyelids wouldn't drop. He couldn't reach any conclusion. Finally, the dawn broke. Finally, it was as if someone entered his heart and solved the problem. He decided his duty. He would stop working at Maheshda's shop. He would evade the pull of Shyamali's embrace and run far away. He would take shelter somewhere else. Didn't the world have many more Maheshdas? He had turned up alone; he would be left alone. The relationship between him and Shyamali was like an unseasonal rain. The memories of it would be erased with the passage of time. He would forget Shyamali completely.

The moment this thought crept into Moseen's mind, he felt relaxed. He danced happily as he had reached a definite conclusion. He had dispelled the cobweb of doubt and confusion. He felt like a free bird in an open sky. He shook his wings. He thought he had lived like a prisoner for a long time. He was free today. He fell off the cement bench in his attempt to get up. The morning sun was up, sprinkling rays of hope.

Despite having spent a sleepless night, Moseen wasn't worried. He would go to Maheshda's shop for the last time. He would bid him goodbye. He wouldn't meet Shyamali. Meeting her had no meaning. She might feel sad for a day or two; she might shed tear but things would settle down soon. Everything would become normal. Shyamali would get married and have a family. She would live comfortably. Let it be; where is the harm? She wouldn't remember her speech on caste and religion. Of course, he loved Shyamali. What was good for her was equally good for him. Let her live in peace wherever she wanted to. An unseen force made Moseen run towards Maheshda's hotel. He thought Maheshda would be surprised to see him so early. He would say, "Thank God, he has understood the value of time. He would surely become a man in a few years."

However, Moseen couldn't enter the shop. A he crowd had already gathered there. Some vehicles were parked nearby. Moseen was alarmed. "Arey! Police vehicles in front of the shop... Has there been a robbery? Yesterday, everything was fine. He had presented the account to Shyamali's mother after closing the shop and returned to the park. Someone must have created mischief. Moseen tried to push through the crowd. He could hear the ear-shattering cry of Shyamali's mother from inside. Had something happened to Maheshda? Moseen entered with fear reigning in his heart. Maheshda was lying on the floor, unconscious. Shyamali was sleeping on the bed, peacefully. Someone had spread a white sheet on her. When he looked carefully at



her, he was startled.his heart ached. Then... Shyamali... cheated him. She left forever... leaving him... alone. Moseen proceeded towards the bed, dragging his feet along. Lifting the white sheet from the face of Shyamali, he saw a thin smile stuck to har lips. The freshness of the face hadn't even disappeared. It was as if she was crying aloud, "You lost, Moseen... I won... I won."