

The Changing Universe of Women



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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

I hereby declare that this thesis is the student's own work and effort. All sources of information incorporated here have been duly acknowledged. This thesis has been submitted with my approval.

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DECLARATION

This thesis is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly, with due reference to the literature, and acknowledgement of collaborative research and discussions.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Shejuti Pasha". The signature is written in a cursive style. Below the signature is a horizontal line.

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Abstract

Women have aspired for their own empowerment and have often looked for opportunities to express their abilities and intellect. For centuries, female authors have influenced the landscape of narrative writing and have produced phenomenal pieces of work that have become a part of popular fiction culture. Significant characters written by women authors, for instance, Elizabeth Bennet (*Pride and Prejudice*), Jane Eyre (*Jane Eyre*), Ammu (*The God of Small Things*) and Shoba (*Interpreter of Maladies*) have dominated the world of fictional work for a long time. These personalities represent strong women who aspire to transcend societal boundaries and are not hesitant to choose an unconventional path in order to fulfill their dreams. As I wrote the short stories for this paper, I realized that I wanted to create characters that are strong, confident and compelling and I tried to sketch them as representatives of society, a society where patriarchy is a threshold that women have to cross regularly in order to establish their opinions. For instance, in “The Hyacinth,” Sneha has to abandon her marital relationship in order to fulfill her ambition whereas, in “A Bad Day,” Sabah chooses a similar path to free herself from a controlling courtship. Although fictional in nature, these characters are manifestations of women we come across in different spheres of society and through my writing, I wanted to explore different dimensions of female characters who are strong contenders when it comes to fulfilling their dreams and aspirations in the face of obstacles.

Introduction

In the words of Virginia Woolf, “Fiction is like a spider’s web, attached ever so slightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners. Often the attachment is scarcely perceptible.” The history of fiction dates back to centuries and it is an indispensable part of literature. As Woolf says, it is connected to our lives in many ways but the link is rarely visible.

It is assumed that the art of composing fiction flourished in the nineteenth century as mentioned in *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction*. The authors say, “The nineteenth century has come to seem the great age of narrative, particularly in the realistic novel” (5). Hoffman and Murphy also state that, “The latter part of the twentieth century saw the development of new forms such as the documentary novel, which forces us to establish the border between fact and fiction; magical realism, which mingles realism and the fantastic; and science fiction and fantasy, which often posit an alternative universe” (10). Here, we get a glimpse of the kinds of fiction that have existed throughout history and if we explore further, we can see that most works portray fundamental themes such as realism, in the form of social, psychological, magical or lies on the border of postmodernism. Wars such as the first and second World Wars have also had profound effects on the type of fiction that has been produced over centuries.

Creating a work of fiction takes time, space and careful consideration. There are a number of themes that writers have chosen over time in order to compose their work. One such theme is realism that describes events without any romanticism or idealization. As mentioned in the essay, “Marxist Aesthetics and Literary Realism,” Lukacs suggests, “Realism is the recognition of the fact that a work of literature can rest neither on a lifeless average, as the naturalists suppose, nor on an individual principle which dissolves its own self into nothingness” (103).

History tells us that poetry is the most popular and earliest form of literature. Realistic novels however, brought a change to that. This form of literature employed certain techniques in order to make the piece of work relatable to real life without eulogizing scenes or concepts. Through the impression of realism, emerged the concept of Social Realism and these novels represented the story of the common man and delineated the hardships of the lower class. Popular examples of novels in the Social Realism genre include *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain. As Lukacs says, “True great realism thus depicts man and society as complete entities, instead of showing merely one or the other of their aspects” (103).

Another form of realism is Magic Realism. Set in the real world, the stories come with a spark of magic where the characters experience incidents that may seem unnatural or irrational to the readers. Faris mentions, “Very briefly, magical realism combines realism and the fantastic in such a way that magical elements grow organically out of the reality portrayed” (311). Common examples of novels where authors have used this concept are *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez and *Beloved* by Toni Morrison.

Psychological Realism on the other hand is completely different from Social or Magical Realism. Although it inherits its approach from realism, it focuses on the psychological investigation and deconstruction of the characters through a detailed analysis of their thought processes and actions. It focuses on revealing the mental setup of the personalities in the story and makes sure to highlight their emotions and allows readers to assess the reasons behind their behaviour. Two significant examples of Psychological Realism in literary work are *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoevsky and *The Age of Innocence* by Edith Wharton.

As Ernest Hemingway mentioned in *Men at War*, “There was no really good true war book during the entire four years of the war. The only true writing that came through during the war was in poetry. One reason for this is that poets are not arrested as quickly as prose writers.”

We all know that the Great War that took place between 1914-1918 shook the Western World and brought a drastic change to the cultural and social landscape. Literature was one of the areas that was heavily impacted by the war and a number of social, political and economic changes occurred due to which people felt the need to express their thoughts and emotions. Men and women employed writing as a form of emotional outlet and began to note down their thoughts and experiences during the war. This impacted the kind of writing that was produced since women started making contributions to literature and marked the onset of female writers. These post-war writings also paved the way to Modernism which is thought to have started around the early 1900s and is considered to channel towards Postmodernism.

Postmodernism refers to a change in perspective that presents itself in a variety of areas such as art, social sciences, literature and technology. It is usually associated with Modernism and is considered both a continuation and a shift from Modernist principles. Many critics affirm that postmodern fiction is an after element of the Second World War. According to Burgass, “Postmodern fiction is often and appropriately characterized by a concern with ontological categories, an exploration of the boundaries between fact and fiction, the world and the text” (399). It can be argued that similar to the modern novels, postmodern novels also present traditional ideas of plot and character development. In “A Brief Story of Postmodern Plot,” Burgass states that, “In postmodern fiction, thematic and plot devices are designed specifically to question linear history and temporality” (402). She also presents notions on time saying that, “Postmodern fiction tends to favour relative time over subjective time and to question the very

possibility of objective time and measurement” (403). A number of different authors have been labelled as postmodern authors and works such as Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity Rainbow* and Italo Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller* are considered notable examples of postmodern fiction. Overall it can be said that, although postmodern fiction focuses on the nature of fiction itself, it is written as if the narratives are independent of society.

“The short story writer Edith Templeton says of her stories, in a piece in *The New Yorker*, that they are “outside facts painted with subjective feelings.” This may be as good a definition of the contemporary short story as anything” (Hall 167).

Here are four short stories, each with their own individual themes recounting the many life experiences through fiction.

Theme: Mystery

“Very few of us are what we seem”

- Agatha Christie, “The Man in the Mist”

The Mystery of Mrs. Roy

Knock. Knock.

“Dr. Roy?”

The sound of hurried footsteps could be heard in the distance. A silhouette moving in the dark, the brush of a gown, a cat leaping in surprise and the unbolting of a latch.

Dr. Roy squinted her eyes in the dark and tried to look outside. It was a stormy night and there had been a power cut a few hours ago. She could make nothing of the stranger knocking on her door. She firmly grabbed the flashlight in her hands but did not turn it on. Instead, she wrapped her silk gown against her body and inquired,

“Who’s there?”

“It is I, Satish, from the neighbouring village. My sister is having those pains again. Can you please help?”

With a tired sigh, Dr. Roy decided to open the door. She turned her flashlight towards the man waiting outside her door to make sure it was nobody else and then asked him to wait. Within five minutes, Dr. Roy was ready with her brown, leather briefcase and on her way with her two female assistants.

The woman was lying on the floor on a palm leaf mat. Her legs were spread wide and she was writhing in agony. Dr. Roy took a close look at her and exclaimed, “She needs to deliver this child immediately! Somebody bring warm water and I will quickly send one of the girls for more equipment.”

Someone whispered in the dark, “You cannot deliver the baby here.”

Mrs. Roy turned around to look for the speaker but there was no one in sight.

“It is my mother, Doctor. She thinks delivering this child will bring shame to the family since my sister is a spinster.”

“But what else can we do Satish? Your sister’s condition is critical.”

The woman spoke again, a bit more firmly this time. “I won’t let you deliver this monster here, it is an illegitimate child. It will only bring bad luck to the family.”

Dr. Roy was at a loss for words. Finally, after seeing no other way, she decided to carry the pregnant woman to her house with the help of her assistants and Satish. The storm had only stopped a few minutes ago and the streets were still muddy and water-clogged. Transport was hard to find at this hour. Finally, the woman’s brother managed a three-wheeler traditional van to carry his sister to Dr. Roy’s house. The narrow tyres of the van frequently got stuck in the mud and Satish had to dismount every few minutes to pull the vehicle out.

It took them more than half an hour to reach the doctor’s home which would have taken less had the roads been better. Dr. Roy quickly got down and went inside to set up the room for labour. As she was going inside, she had an uncanny feeling that all might not end well.

The girl’s name was Sabitri. She was barely eighteen. According to rumours, she had eloped with a man ten years older than her but had returned home without him. However, it came out a few months later that she was bearing his child. The man was a known thief and Sabitri had run

for the hills the moment police raided their makeshift home on the outskirts of the city. But she couldn't get rid of the child. She just did not want to and that is what she told the gynaecologist that stormy night when the doctor and her two assistants were desperately trying to deliver a healthy baby.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Roy failed that night. Malnutrition and neglect had taken a toll on the mother's body and the baby was delivered in a stillborn state.

The doctor and her associates cleaned the whole place with disinfectant and laid the mother in an adjacent room. Little sobs could be heard from there as the girl's brother broke the news of the dead newborn to his sister.

"Dr. Roy, what shall happen to the infant?"

"We will have to dispose of it somewhere," the doctor replied.

"But where?"

At this, one of her girls spoke out. "We will use the canal at the back. The body may just wash out in the channel that leads to the river."

"A whole body washing out? I don't think that's possible. But we may dismember it just in case. What do you think Satish?"

"Whatever you think is appropriate. We have already lost the child. At least my sister is free now. We might even try to marry her off."

The doctor then took her assistants, Kabita and Krishna and disposed of the dead child in the nearby river. They did not take any risks with the canal this time. It was the third case this

month and the neighbours might just start talking. Dr. Roy was afraid that somebody might call the police and with her husband now dead, there would be nobody to save her except her two associates.

They returned very stealthily in the dark, making sure nobody had seen them. But just when they were turning the latch on the main door, something moved in the nearby bush. The doctor turned her flashlight towards the source of the sound but she could see nothing.

All three of them then entered the house swiftly to avoid being seen. As dawn broke, Satish decided to take his sister back to his parents' house. He paid the doctor a handsome amount of money to keep everything under wraps and left, never to be seen around the house again.

The day brought sunshine and clear skies and it seemed for a while that the night's events were over. Dr. Roy filled her logbook as usual and decided that she would visit her son in the city for a change. It had been three months since the death of her husband but she had refused to give in to shock or sorrow. Mr. Soumen Roy had passed away from a sudden heart attack one midsummer night. He had no prior symptoms of a heart disease and nobody had predicted that at the age of fifty five, the strong and fit Soumen Roy would suddenly die of a frail heart.

Mrs. Roy was sleeping peacefully in the next room when her husband breathed his last. Unfortunately, nobody heard the last words of the dying man. As a result, his last wishes remained unfulfilled.

The husband wife duo had not shared the same bed for years. Their only son, Anupam lived in the city, a few hours' drive away and Mr. and Mrs. Roy would visit him almost every week.

They had put up this pretense of being a happy couple for years and nobody outside the family knew about the slow decline and deterioration of their conjugal bond. Mr. Roy had decided over the years that he needed more female affection, which meant going outside the circumference of his marital boundary and seeking attention elsewhere. Mrs. Roy on the other hand had firmly stood by her devotion and dedication to work and had turned a blind eye towards her husband and his activities.

After Anupam finished high school, they sent their son to a good College in the city. Over time, Mrs. Roy acquired a number of female assistants to help her when women came to give birth and her name spread out across the small area. But there were puzzling speculations too.

Many infants never made it out alive and rumours spread about the mysterious disappearance of these bodies. Mrs. Roy never confronted these claims and every time such an incident happened, she would go and visit her son in the city or disappear for a few weeks. Things became difficult after the death of Mr. Roy. With no male figure over her head, there was no one to protect the dwellers from scrutinizing her methods of practice.

Day time deliveries were now carried out in the darkness of the night and whenever a newborn died, Dr. Roy and her diligent assistants disposed of it in the nearby waters. The canals were surrounded by tall trees and dense, green shrubbery and no one except thugs and ruffians went there. But from time to time rumours would arise that passers-by heard mysterious wailing from the ponds. Some remarked that it was the voice of children, others said otherwise.

Snakes coiled through the bushes and dense shrubbery surrounded the water channels. A narrow stream led into the river and the many substances flung into it found their place in the waters. A small crematorium resided at the side of the water body. There was a statue of a goddess right beside the place where dead bodies turned to ashes from time to time and a large banyan tree stood watching over everything in the distance.

In her idle time, Mrs. Roy would invite guests and entertain them from dawn till dusk. People would arrive from the city in their white and blue Ambassadors and park them in front of her house. Sometimes the cars would be kept on the narrow brick streets and this would render movement difficult for the townspeople.

Nobody knew the source of their wealth, the Roys were one of the few affluent families who decided to settle outside the city after the partition. Mr. Roy was a businessman who frequently went on trips throughout the year and it was on one of those trips that he met Debolina.

She was a young doctor struggling to set up her career as a gynaecologist. Smart and responsible, Debolina was an attractive woman. At the age of twenty five, she was already practicing in a reputed clinic and supporting herself and her family. But Debolina knew that her career might not go as planned since her mother did not support it. So, when Soumen Roy's proposal came out of the blue, she decided that getting married and leaving her mother's sight could be a way to save her career.

Mr. Roy was an older man in comparison to all the other contenders who tried to court Debolina. He was also a well-settled man since they had a strong family business, a lavish house

and multiple properties to their name. But marrying him would also mean going to the neighbouring country and leaving her motherland behind.

In the end Debolina's only parent conceded, and Debolina left her younger brother and mother with her newly wedded husband, who was eleven years her senior.

It was the other side of Bengal and the country was rich in fish, vegetables and textile. Debolina settled in quickly in the two-storey bungalow on the outskirts of the capital and started her practice. But the romance got cold quickly when Debolina got busy with cases and Mr. Roy diverted his attention elsewhere. He would be away on business trips for months on end, leaving his young wife and small child to be looked after by domestic help.

From time to time, Mrs. Roy would hear of anonymous women linked to Mr. Roy but she would never inquire after them. She focused on her work instead and over time, her practice grew beyond her neighbours. People from nearby villages came to her home for delivering children. Some of these women were spinsters like Sabitri but not all of them were eager to keep the foetus. So they came to Mrs. Roy to sort matters they could no longer solve themselves.

The death of Mr. Roy came as a shock to the community. With his death, the entire estate came under the ownership of Mrs. Roy but a husband's protection was no longer there and she feared the locals more than anything else. And her fears were proved right over time.

A few months later, Mrs. Roy opened her rear door in the morning to find the body of a mutilated child lying in front of the clearing at the back of her house. She took her girls and

looked around but found nothing. At last they disposed of the body like the other ones and Mrs. Roy decided to stop her practice for good.

Strange things kept happening nonetheless. As Mrs. Roy was going out for her evening walk one day, she distinctly heard the closing of her back door. There was no one else in the house. Her assistants had gone to the nearby market. However, she decided to comb through the house and found no one. The matter struck her as very odd.

As they all returned home later that evening, she shared the incident with the girls. They were both confounded by her account and decided that one of them would stay with her from now on.

The house turned into a strange abode after that. Guests would no longer feel lively when they came to visit Mrs. Roy. An invisible gloom resided there and the once dynamic house, known for its guests and parties became a symbol of silence for all.

Mrs. Roy decided to talk to her neighbours and went to the surrounding houses to gather some explanation on the matter. Whoever responded kept claiming the house was cursed and that she had brought the curse on herself by delivering dead infants and disposing of them in the waters.

When Anupam visited his mother later that month, he was astounded to see the deterioration of his mother's reputation and practice. He offered to take her to the city and relocate her assistants but Mrs. Roy did not concur. She decided to stay in her late husband's house till death.

After Anupam left for the city, Mrs. Roy's gloom deepened and she rarely went outside. She would lock herself inside on most days and ponder over her life's experiences. The girls became very concerned but she took no heed.

After constant urging, Mrs. Roy finally left her house one day. She walked around her neighbourhood in her usual chiffon saree but talked to no one. She visited the market, the nearby school and at last came to the pond and the crematorium near the river. She looked at the river and sat at the crematorium stairs till dusk. Then she slowly made her way towards home and retired to her bedroom after a hearty dinner.

When Mrs. Roy did not get up at her usual time the next morning, the girls went to check in on her. Her door was locked from inside and the girls had to break the door down with the help of a few neighbours who agreed to come.

Mrs. Roy's body was found lifeless on the cold, mosaic floor. She was wearing a light pink chiffon saree that lay in neat folds over her slender frame. The watch she always wore was still on her hand and there was a look of surprise on her face.

A long window was open at the furthest corner. When police came to investigate, they found no signs of forced entry or footprints in the room. The postmortem report cited the cause of death as 'shock' and till this day, there is a mystery surrounding Mrs. Roy's death.

Theme: Realism

“Suffering has been stronger than all other teaching, and has taught me to understand what your heart used to be. I have been bent and broken, but- I hope- into a better shape.”

- Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*

The Hyacinth

Sneha looked at her surroundings. The potted plants, beaded wind chimes and the withering rose petals lying on the nearby table reminded her of a faraway place. She was now a stranger in her own house and nothing could make that feeling ebb away.

Her dwindling marriage had left her in dismay. The growing distance with her husband had elongated to the point where they were both strangers in their own abode. They barely acknowledged each other's presence and Sneha was considering leaving this man and her marriage behind.

Sneha's siblings were startled when she shared her thoughts with them. Her sisters, Adah and Henna could not contemplate why their mother figure was acting in such a rash way all of a sudden. Leaving one's husband seemed like a very irresponsible thing to do!

Sneha had looked after her sisters and elder brother after their mother passed away. Her mother had colon cancer and it had only been detected during her last few months. She had hidden her symptoms well enough for the disease to go by unnoticed and by the time her husband and four children had come to know of it, she was only a few steps away from death.

The hospital room smelled of disinfectant and medicine. There was a sense of loss in the air. It was as if loss had become a person and was standing right beside them. Sneha looked at her mother's pale face. She looked like she was finally at peace now. Death had given her what life had not. Sneha held her sisters tightly as silent tears crawled down her face.

Their mother's demise brought a fresh wave of events into the Rahman family. Mr. Rahman lost himself into oblivion; Ibrahim buried himself in work while Adah and Henna unreservedly exercised their free will. They stopped going to tuitions, bunked classes at school and passed their leisure however they liked. The more concerned Sneha grew about her adolescent sisters, the less concerned everyone else seemed in the family.

A few months later, Mr. Rahman suddenly showed up with a newly wedded wife. She was half his age, had been married once and was apparently the sister of a shopkeeper in the neighbourhood. Sneha was in utter dismay and immediately called Ibrahim.

“Did you hear what abba did?” Sneha inquired angrily.

“Yes. What about it?” Ibrahim replied curtly.

“What do you mean? It has only been two months since amma passed away! This is unacceptable!”

“Well, that doesn't make much difference. You should be pleased! At least there will be someone to look after Adah and Henna. Now hang up, I have work to do.”

As the call got disconnected, Sneha looked at her phone in shock and dropped on the sofa. Ibrahim could be extremely impassive sometimes and it led her to think that the entire responsibility of tending after her family rested on her own shoulders.

As darkness descended from the sky, Sneha wondered how she would break the news to Akash. He surely wouldn't take it well. His family already had an existing dislike towards

Sneha's father, who seemed too aloof for his own good and now the news of his fresh marriage would worsen matters more.

"Bhabi, you look upset," remarked Sneha's sister-in-law when she was about to enter the kitchen to prepare dinner. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, Tasmia. What would you like to have for dinner today?"

"Anything you like Bhabi. I am not in the mood for food."

"Why so? Is everything alright? Did you get into trouble at school?"

"No bhabi. Its just my boyfriend. Never mind, you should cook."

Sneha watched in consternation as her sister-in-law uttered those words and left. She recalled her teenage days in Kuwait. Having a boyfriend at sixteen was forbidden at her time. Her mother would have been enraged. Yet, it was unusual not to have one these days.

The hot potatoes seared her fingers and Sneha quickly dipped them in ice cold water. Her mind had raced back to the time when she and Akash used to court each other in secret and impatiently wait for weeks for their rendezvous. Sadly, all this was in the past. Akash rarely had time to talk to her now, let alone take her somewhere.

Those weren't the only promises that were broken. When they had married, Akash had vowed that he would make sure Sneha would continue her Masters' in Sociology and pursue her career in the local NGO that she worked in. However, that never happened. Akash's mother got ill a few months later and he insisted that Sneha take care of her mother-in-law instead of focusing on a career that, according to him, was going nowhere.

“But I love this job Akash, it means something to me,” Sneha had asserted.

“No, no, Sneha. You are still roaming in the dark! A career as an NGO employee will get you nowhere, plus, ammi is sick. You need to take care of her,” Akash said condescendingly.

Sneha had wanted to contest why she was the one who had to take this responsibility, wasn't ammi Akash's responsibility as well? But she remained quiet to maintain peace. Akash could get very aggressive and she was in no mood for it that day. It was the last day of her mother's treatment and the doctors had said they would push no more.

“Well, hurry up! Akash will be home in no time and he will be hungry.”

Sneha shook her thoughts away and focused on peeling the potatoes. Ammi never cooked or helped her in the kitchen even if she cared so much about her starving son. Nonetheless, she couldn't persist very long as her husband entered the house in no time and immediately started inquiring about dinner. It took more than an hour for everything to be ready and by that time, Akash, Tasmia and ammi were all infuriated.

After dinner, Sneha decided to talk to Akash about her father and his new wife, but Akash was too tired to speak. Crestfallen, Sneha went to the living room, sat on the long beige sofa and started looking for TV shows to watch.

Beep!

Sneha picked up her phone from the sofa.

It was a text message from one of her college classmates. She responded briefly and asked Sameer what he had been up to the last two years after their graduation ceremony. They reminisced about their college days and kept texting each other till the muezzin called for prayer.

Sneha was astonished to find that she had talked to someone for so long at a stretch. As she went to bed at dawn, she thought about her college days and her heart ached thinking of how carefree and elated she used to be.

“Sneha, wake up! Its 9 am. I have to go to the office,” yelled Akash.

She turned around to find an infuriated Akash looking at her with large, angry eyes.

“Why are you yelling Akash?” Sneha asked groggily.

“Don’t you know the time? I need breakfast now, otherwise I will be late.”

Sneha dragged her sleep-deprived body and splashed water on her face. She looked at Akash rushing to get ready for office and wondered why he couldn’t just grab a bite on his way to work or prepare something by himself just for once. It aggrieved her to think that everyone in the family counted on her to do one household chore or the other without considering that perhaps they could do it themselves.

Sameer messaged again. It was twilight and Sneha could see birds returning to their nests. She felt a sharp pain in her chest and a sudden urge to return home. She decided to sit down in the small cane chair in her balcony and reply to Sameer’s text.

“Hi again,” she said and sent a smiley along with the message.

“What are you up to this beautiful evening?” inquired Sameer.

“I am up, at the top of the eleventh floor. I just recalled, you have a fear of heights, don’t you?”

“What are you doing so high?”

“Nothing. Just enjoying the breeze in my balcony,” replied Sneha. “You still did not answer my question.”

“Oh right!” Sameer replied. “Yes, I do. It happened after the accident.”

“You mean the one where you fell while climbing the Chandranath Hill in Chittagong? I remember you missed a month’s worth of classes after that injury.”

“Yes. And I developed quite a number of phobias after that, alongside acrophobia,” Sameer retorted.

Their conversation went on for a few hours till Akash returned from the office. It was the same everyday and Sneha soon found herself eagerly waiting for these tête-à-têtes during twilight.

Summer turned into Fall and Sneha could feel her attention diverting towards Sameer more often than necessary. Their conversations never included each other’s partners and Sneha often wondered why Sameer never mentioned his fiancée.

Sneha had known his wife-to-be in high school. Ushoshi was one of the first few friends she had made after returning to Bangladesh. She was a lively girl who actively took part in social activities. Also a part-time model, Ushoshi did shoots for local brands during her free

time. Sometimes Sneha pondered whether lack of time and attention had pushed Sameer into seeking attention elsewhere but those thoughts were always engulfed by her own guilt of associating with someone other than Akash.

They met at a local café six months later and Sameer ordered Sneha's favourite coffee. He drank his Americano, spoke animatedly and stole glimpses at Sneha from time to time. She could see a certain desire in his eyes and kept averting his gaze. They talked about general things like the economy and weather for a while and when it was time to say goodbye, Sameer got up from his chair and gave Sneha a long drawn hug.

Sneha could feel short impulses of electricity running through her body. She swiftly withdrew herself, clutched her light blue purse and walked towards the other side of the road to hail a rickshaw.

"Ammi saw you go out today. Did you not tell her before you went outside?" Akash inquired at dinner.

"I was in a hurry," Sneha mumbled.

"Did you go to the grocery store?"

Sneha was dreading this. She knew Akash would start bombarding her with relentless questions.

"I went to the coffee shop at Dhanmondi 27."

“Where did you get the money for the coffee?” Akash asked while chewing his lamb chops.

“I did not have to. Sameer paid for it.”

“Is this your college classmate? What made you contact him after so many years?” And the questions never ended. Akash kept on prodding Sneha till they started arguing. At one point, Akash flung a crystal glass on the floor.

Sneha screamed in surprise and Akash pressed his hands around her mouth to muffle her shrieks. Then he pushed his wife on the leather armchair beside the table and walked out of the house. He did not return that night. As morning dawned, Sneha’s conscience started seeing things in a brighter light.

Was this a healthy marriage? These were the first thoughts on her mind as she opened her eyes. She hadn’t left the armchair that night and had fallen asleep around 3 am. Her instincts kept telling her that this marriage was over and she woke Ibrahim at 5 am.

“I need to see you. Can you come pick me up please?” Sneha urged.

As Ibrahim made sense of his surroundings, his muzzy brain and ears tried to cope up with the sudden news. “Alright, I will come pick you. When should I arrive?”

“Right now.” The sense of urgency in her voice alarmed Ibrahim. He jumped out of bed, got ready and arrived at his sister’s house within thirty minutes. Before she left, Sneha took her mother-in-law’s permission to leave, filled her suitcase with clothes and walked out the main door.

Their stepmother was making breakfast when they entered the house. She smiled and Sneha immediately felt better. They sat themselves at the table and Ibrahim started digging into his food instantly.

“So Akash doesn’t spend time with you anymore?” inquired Rahima.

“Not only that, he completely submits to his mother and follows her like a disciple,” Sneha told her stepmother.

“So why did you not leave him?” she prodded.

“I did not want to be called a divorcee auntie,” blurted Sneha.

Ibrahim looked at his younger sister incredulously and remarked, “Am I looking at a twenty-six year old independent woman who is afraid to leave her abusing husband simply because she does not want to appear a divorcee in front of the society?”

Rahima tried to hush her step son in an attempt to stop him from overpowering Sneha but Sneha nodded in ascent.

“Well, you need to reconsider your situation little sister. I am no better at this, but this is not what mother would have wanted!”

Sneha flinched at the mention of her mother. But she also realized how right Ibrahim was. Their mother had always inspired them to be strong, well-informed and independent. And yet, here she was, cowering away from divorce because of certain perceptions.

Akash showed up at her doorstep the next day. Ibrahim opened the door with sleepy eyes and was startled to find his sister's husband waiting in front of the folding steel gate.

"Goodmorning Akash. A little too early isn't it?" Ibrahim joked as he inserted the key in the lock to open the door.

"I have come to see my wife."

"Of course you are welcome to see her. But it is an odd hour," Ibrahim mumbled as he led the way.

This was his second visit to Sneha's house. Akash had come here only once before, on the day of his wedding. The house seemed alien to him, almost like he was in a stranger's home. On his way to Sneha's room, he came across Rahima who was praying in a corner of the large living room. He was startled to see her and gave Ibrahim an incredulous stare.

Sneha was lying on the rightmost corner of the bed. Her long, dark hair lay in folds on the white pillow and she lay peacefully curled up like a baby. The other side of the double bed was occupied by her sisters, who were sound asleep. It was a hot summer morning, and the air conditioning was running at full capacity. Akash tiptoed across the room and shook Sneha.

Sneha jumped up with a start and her eyes widened with disbelief.

"What are you doing here?"

"I have come to take you home," Akash replied slowly.

"I am home," Sneha replied firmly.

“Not this, I meant our house”

Sneha sat upright in bed and looked Akash in the eye for the first time in months.

“Sadly, where I lived for the past two years is a house, not a home. And I am not going back to a place that makes me feel any less.”

“You are delusional Sneha. Get ready and come with me. Ammi is waiting,” Akash snapped angrily.

“Well, she will have to wait no longer. Her daughter-in-law is not going back.”

“What do you mean not going back? Since, when did you start taking your own decisions?”

“The moment I decided to stop floating like a hyacinth. I want to finish my education, get my job back and yes, get away from you.”

Akash looked at her in surprise. Sneha seemed quite determined. She was no longer the timid, weak-willed girl he had married. She was a woman who knew what she wanted.

“Let me know if you change your mind,” Akash replied in defeat as he made his way out the door.

The beautiful breeze and salty air of the ocean was a refreshing experience. Sneha almost couldn't believe that she was here, in the longest natural sea beach in the world. A foreign NGO had hired her as a Program Officer in their literacy program and Sneha had immediately grabbed

the opportunity. As she stood at the verandah of her small bungalow, she felt the sweetness of the air and the feeling of freedom that it brought along with it.

Theme: Psychological Realism

“Pain and suffering are always inevitable for a large intelligence and a deep heart. The really great men must, I think, have great sadness on earth.”

- Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*

Light and Shadow

Why do morgues smell like this? Zoe wondered.

She could hear Manoshi crying behind her. Manoshi, her older sister who had just lost the man she loved, was crying fervently.

It was all chaos to Manoshi. She didn't know whether she was living in a high-packed action movie, or it was actually reality thumping her on the face with a baseball bat. Her eyes were blood-red and swollen from excessive crying and her blue jamdani still bore the bloodstains from the accident.

Manoshi could not believe that all this had actually happened, that the man she loved so deeply was not in this world anymore.

It was 12pm. The midday sun was right at the center of the sky, releasing boiling waves and heating up the world as if punishing it for its misdeeds. Manoshi kept walking in the heat with her blue jamdani getting ruffled by the occasional bursts of wind. The ring felt heavy on her finger. It had been only a week since she had been wearing it and she could already feel the weight of its responsibilities weighing her down.

The miniature diamonds glinted in the sunlight and Manoshi stopped to take a breath. It only seemed like yesterday that Turjo was at her house, discussing their wedding with both their parents and sealing the promise with a beautiful white diamond ring.

“But I don't like diamonds Turjo!” Manoshi had interjected while putting on the ring.

“Please love, do it for me will you?”

Manoshi couldn't ignore the pleading smile or the mischief in his eyes.

"Fine," she muttered and smiled.

Manoshi sighed and began walking again. She kept wondering how they would handle matters from now on. She knew for a fact that it was already difficult to marry someone your parents did not approve of, more so when the groom was of a different faith. These acts were not commendable in this society.

Anyone who had the audacity to do that was ostracized; you would no longer be a part of the community, your parents would look down upon you, your friends would give you the cold shoulder and on top of that, the society would constantly ridicule you. And yet, Manoshi had taken this unorthodox step, a step full of unprecedented adventures and qualms.

Sometimes she wondered where she got all the vitality from, the unending strength and desire to tackle all the impending problems.

Love does conquer all, she thought to herself. *In the end, love does conquer all.*

Manoshi came to a halt as a bus blared its horn. She hadn't realized when her thoughts had carried her from the footpath to the middle of the road. She offered a few words of apology to the indignant driver and returned to the pedestrian walkway.

Turjo had promised to wait for her at the corner of MM Avenue and she knew that he would be late as usual. What she didn't know was that this would be the last time she would see him alive; had she known, she would never have agreed to meet him at all.

Turjo arrived. He could see Manoshi at a distance, his beautiful Manoshi. Talkative, shy, sarcastic and loud, all at the same time. He wondered a lot these days. He wondered how he fell for her, why he fell for her and what he was going to do to give her all the happiness she deserved. He knew things were going to take a capricious turn from now on and if truth be told, he wasn't just afraid, he was paranoid.

Manoshi was looking breathtaking in the blue jamdani saree, and her long, dark hair flowing in the wind added the most spectacular effect. She always preferred leaving her hair untied and added a fresh flower or two sometimes. Wearing minimal jewellery was something she always preferred and she would mostly leave the house with light makeup and a tinge of rouge on her lips.

Turjo stood on the footpath, caught up in a whirlwind of thoughts. It was hard to believe that he had fallen for someone so diverse from his expectations and he was about to marry her.

“Are you sure about this girl,” his mother had asked.

The situation wasn't as difficult as he had anticipated.

“I love her, if that's what you are asking and I don't care if she's Christian. She is the one I am willing to spend the rest of my life with,” Turjo had answered.

“But do you promise to love and cherish her as long as you live? She is not like the ones you usually date Turjo. I am just saying....” his mother had swayed off.

It was no news that Turjo had dated multiple women before. He had had a string of girlfriends, none of whom he was ever inclined to marry. Something always came up and he eventually drifted away from the relationship. But that was up until the point he met Manoshi. This girl had changed his world, lit up the darkest corners of his heart and made him believe in life again. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't think of anyone else who had made him feel this way.

Turjo brushed his thoughts away and walked towards Manoshi. He could see her at a distance, fixing her saree and trying very hard to conceal how uncomfortable she was. Not being her usual attire, Manoshi was finding it quite difficult to manage the saree and was sweating profusely.

And then she saw him, standing in the distance. He was looking at her intently with a smile on his face and all her discomfort disappeared instantaneously. She wasn't feeling uncomfortable anymore. On the contrary, she was now quite elated that she was wearing all that Turjo had given her; the silver jhumkas, the cobalt blue bangles and the pair of dainty silver anklets.

Turjo made an attempt to cross the road. There were too many cars and they kept rushing by at very high speeds. He could already feel his hands trembling. His eagerness to meet Manoshi, along with speeding cars and the intolerable heat made his movements clumsy.

He could see Manoshi on the other side of the road, standing expectantly, waving at him and smiling. He smiled too and took a step ahead. And then another and then no more.

“Turjo!” Manoshi screamed as she saw the red Toyota speeding away.

The racing automobile left the streets crimson with Turjo’s blood and all Manoshi could see was a lifeless body lying motionless in a pool of vermilion fluid. She ran towards the body, now lying motionless on the pitch-black road. A few cars had already halted and a small crowd was forming around Turjo.

Manoshi dropped on her knees and took his head in her lap. She saw the curved edges around his lips that had formed a parting smile and tears poured like rain from her eyes. His body was still warm and Manoshi desperately checked his veins for some sign of life. But there was none and she finally called his parents.

The morgue was a cold, dull place.

Turjo’s mother was crying relentlessly and her husband was patting her head from time to time. Nobody spoke a word.

Manoshi was standing in the room where Turjo’s body was kept. She wasn’t letting anyone cover his face and stood there in a transfixed state, staring at him. Everyone was outside except Zoe. She was standing beside her sister. Her arms were folded and she was trying to fight back tears.

“Can I please stay?” Zoe pleaded.

“Go away. Please,” Manoshi replied coldly.

She had stopped crying now and was staring at the cut on Turjo's forehead. All the bloodstains had been removed and only the bruises were visible. The doctor's report said that brain damage had been the major cause of death. But no matter what it said, Manoshi couldn't believe that Turjo was dead.

She walked towards the body and touched the forehead. It was as cold as ice. But she didn't tremble. Instead, she planted a kiss on Turjo's temple and burst into tears.

A group of men walked in and made preparations to take the body away. Manoshi screamed in protest and tried to stop them from maneuvering the stretcher. Zoe rushed in and held Manoshi as the men wheeled Turjo's body towards the exit. An ambulance had already been called and Turjo's parents climbed in.

Manoshi reluctantly sat in the car with her parents and Zoe. The ambulance led the way, leaving puffs of dark smoke in its wake.

The graveyard smelled of freshly dug earth. Two other bodies lay wrapped in white clothing nearby. Manoshi and her entire family stood outside while the burial took place. They had done the same while the prayers had taken place at the mosque and Manoshi had stood as stiff as a board.

Rain began to pour in large droplets and Manoshi's father urged her to get into the car. It took three attempts on his part and Manoshi only moved when she saw Turjo's mother exiting the cemetery and walking towards her.

"Let's go home sweetie," his mother urged in a broken voice.

Manoshi nodded in ascent and entered the car.

The living room was filled with friends, relatives and acquaintances, all of whom had come to offer their condolences. Manoshi sat as still as a statue, not saying a word, not moving, not looking up. She did not meet anyone's gaze and sat mutely as people pointed at her and spoke in whispers.

Turjo's mother arrived at one point and rescued Manoshi from the crowd. She made attempts to feed Manoshi, all to no avail. Finally, Manoshi left Turjo's house at night and made way towards her own.

Zoe decided to accompany her sister and proposed to spend the night. As soon as they opened the door and stepped in, Manoshi walked to her room and bolted the door from inside.

"Will you please let me in?" Zoe urged.

"Not tonight Zoe. Leave me alone." The door remained closed.

Manoshi lay on the floor and wept the entire night. Sleep engulfed her only in the early hours of the morning and she dreamed of a place far away. It was midday and the sun was at the center of her head. She was sitting alone under a big tree, with her head perched on her knees. The wind whistled and a long, white finger lifted her chin.

She looked up and smiled.

It was Turjo. He wanted to tell her something. She wanted to listen to him, but someone knocked hard on the door and she sat bolt upright in bed.

It was 12pm. Manoshi's mother had showed up with a tray laden with buttered bread, a cup of strong black coffee and an apple. She made her daughter wash her face, combed her hair and urged her to eat. But no matter how hard she tried, Manoshi could swallow nothing. Somehow, the food seemed to get stuck in her throat and finally she had to gulp it down with water.

Days passed and Manoshi tried to overcome the grief of losing Turjo. But things kept getting difficult for her. People interrogated her everywhere she went. They wanted to know all about the accident; how it happened, how she was dealing with the loss and what not. Some even pointed at her ring in dismay, exclaiming that it wasn't right when her fiancée was already dead.

Manoshi stopped stepping out as these encounters got more frequent. She stopped going to college, did not go to the roof to tend to her plants and even stopped running small errands in the area. Normal life came to a halt. Three weeks had passed and things had begun to fall back to the same pattern for everyone, except her.

Unfortunately, she had not been able to cope up and fallen prey to spiralling dreams. They were very strange dreams, ones in which Turjo had commenced to make a constant appearance. On three separate occasions, Manoshi had sensed the presence of someone in her room. It was as if they were trying to tell her something. Every time this happened, she would wake up in cold sweat, panting and gasping for breath.

And then one night, she suddenly saw him. It was past midnight. Not a single soul could be heard from anywhere and even the distant purring of the stray cats in the neighbourhood was absent. There was a silhouette in the balcony, barely a shadow, and it was calling her name.

Manoshi was strolling in her room and stopped dead in her tracks. There was no light except the faint glow emanating from the small lamp beside her bed. It was almost impossible to deduce the outline of the person leaning against the steel border of the balcony.

The voice was familiar, one she had heard over and over again in the last six months.

Was it the same voice? But if that were true, then surely she had lost her mind, because Turjo was no longer alive!

The voice summoned her again. It was lucid this time and it was closer.

Manoshi turned around. She could only spot the silhouette. The lack of light made it difficult to see and she was too afraid to make her way towards the door. She stood rooted to the spot and inquired timidly, “Who is it?”

“The man you loved with all your heart and still do,” the silhouette replied.

“If you are who I think you are, then I must be losing my mind. They buried you in the graveyard and I watched it with my own eyes,” Manoshi replied.

“That was merely my body, not my soul.”

Tears rolled down her cheeks as Manoshi closed her eyes and thought of that day. Turjo remained where he was and kept talking to her.

“It breaks my heart that I cannot go there and touch you,” he said sadly.

The clock struck two and the conversation ensued. Manoshi couldn’t remember when or how she fell asleep. As she woke up in the morning, she discovered herself on the floor, curled up like a baby, facing the balcony door. There was no sign of Turjo anywhere. The power had gone out and she had broken into a sweat.

“Open the door!” Zoe shouted from outside.

Manoshi got up from the floor and let her sister in.

“You look like a nightmare,” Zoe exclaimed. “What happened?”

“Nothing. Mysterious dream. How was college?”

As Zoe filled her in, Manoshi splashed cold water on her face and sat down. She was still shaken from the night’s events and kept pondering whether it was all a dream.

“I submitted the application today.”

“Did they accept it?” Manoshi inquired as she made her bed and accompanied Zoe to the dining area.

“Yes. They said that under the current circumstances, they will let you drop a semester,” Zoe replied.

Manoshi heaved a sigh of relief and helped herself to the warm pancakes her mother had just made. As they drank their coffee, she disclosed the night’s events. Zoe’s mouth opened wide in surprise when she heard that Manoshi had spent the night talking to Turjo.

Was it a supernatural encounter? Did Manoshi see a ghost? Or was she hallucinating?

A million thoughts raced through Zoe's mind. Finally she decided to keep an eye on Manoshi.

When everyone retired for the night, Zoe took a cane stool from the living room, placed it in front of Manoshi's room and waited. Surprisingly, she could hear voices from the other side after a while. It seemed like two people were having a conversation. Zoe strained her ears and peeped through the small crack in the door. After a few failed attempts, Zoe leaned against the wall and dozed off.

"What-are-you-doing-here?" bellowed Manoshi.

Zoe jolted awake and replied casually, "Nothing. I was just sleepwalking."

"You are sitting!" exclaimed Manoshi.

Zoe yawned, took her cane stool and left, leaving an angry Manoshi fuming in front of the half-open door.

Days turned into weeks and Manoshi kept talking to Turjo during the small hours of the night. "I hate it when you leave," Manoshi confessed one night. "I wish you could stay longer."

"I wish I was alive and could spend my entire time with you," Turjo sighed.

"Why can't I touch you?" Manoshi inquired.

"Because you are light and I am shadow," Turjo replied sadly.

The atmosphere in the house changed suddenly. Zoe got extremely worried and revealed the matter to their parents. The pair got so anxious that they decided to seek medical help for Manoshi, in fear that their daughter was becoming unhinged.

Manoshi was baffled and tried her best too explain that it was Turjo who visited her every night but everyone seemed to look past her explanations. Finally she paid a visit to a renowned psychiatrist. The doctor assessed her case and recommended physical activity and benzodiazepines.

After arriving home, Manoshi took one and slept till morning. As she spent her nights sleeping and days combatting drowsiness, the thought of Turjo slipped from her mind. The doctor recommended a family trip during their next session and Manoshi agreed heartily.

It was Zoe's idea to go to the land of the tea hills. Sylhet had embraced monsoon and the beautiful resort nestled in the hills cheered Manoshi. She spent all her time with her parents and Zoe and the family could not be happier. In spite of all this, Manoshi couldn't shake off the feeling that she had left something behind.

They returned to the city after a week and Manoshi decided that it was time to resume college. As bizarre as it seemed, going to classes after such a long time seemed to renew Manoshi's love for academics.

It had been an exhausting day, with four classes and two presentations and Manoshi was extremely tired and irritable. She dropped on the bed right after returning from college and paid no attention to food or her mother's appeals.

The clock struck twelve. Manoshi's stomach was grumbling and she reluctantly rolled to her side and finally rose out of bed. She turned on the small lamp on her bedside table and was making her way towards the kitchen with unsteady steps when she stopped in her tracks suddenly.

The same silhouette was there again. She could clearly see the shadow against the balcony's white railing and someone was calling her name longingly.

Manoshi blinked once and dropped to the floor immediately.

Theme: Love

“These violent delights have violent ends
And in their triumph die, like fire and powder
Which, as they kiss, consume”
-William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*

A Bad Day

Tonmoy looked at the ominous clouds floating in the sky. They gave him a baleful feeling that something bad was about to happen. Suddenly the yellow cab he was riding in, came to a halt behind a long queue of cars.

Traffic in this city is impossible! Tonmoy wondered aloud.

He couldn't help but notice that a gridlock had already formed in Banani, Road 11. Being in a bad mood, a petulant Tonmoy got down from the cab and started walking towards Gulshan Avenue. His interview with the CFO of a renowned multi-national bank was scheduled to be held in an hour and he couldn't bear to lose the opportunity. It was his only ray of hope in the sea of darkness.

After Sabah left, Tonmoy was a wreck. He had never felt so clueless in his life. It was like something very precious was given to him and even before he knew how to take care of it, the treasure was taken away from him.

Tonmoy kept going back and forth over these thoughts when somebody pushed him abruptly. He hit the nearby lamp post and looked up in agony. "Watch out man!" yelled a man in his forties.

It took him a moment to get back to reality and then he realized somebody had just saved him from colliding with a car! He raised his right hand as a form of thanks and kept walking, ignoring the throbbing sensation in his knee the entire time. It got worse throughout the day and by the time he tended to the wound, there was a round, blue bruise on his knee.

Nonetheless, the interview went well, but he missed the position by inches. He could tell from the amused look on the interviewer's face that said, "So close yet so far!"

This wasn't the first interview Tonmoy had missed. It was just another one in his list of failed job interviews. Sometimes Tonmoy wondered whether he should write a book on *100 Ways to Fail in Job Interviews*.

Rain started to pour as he stepped out of the lift into the lobby. He could see the rain droplets trickling down the large glass windows of the edifice. He decided to wait till the rain stopped. The thought of sipping a cup of freshly brewed coffee flickered across his mind. And with it came a shower of sorrow that drenched his memories. He began to think of Sabah and how they loved having coffee in their favourite coffee shop just round the corner. On days like this, Sabah would be so restless, just to go out on the streets once and drench in the rain and have a piece of chocolate brownie along with a cup of steaming, foamy Latte.

All of these made Tonmoy nothing but sad. The blues was all that filled his mind these days. He could almost feel the dejection smother him, killing him like slow poison. Not being able to take those stifling thoughts anymore, Tonmoy decided to venture out of the building.

Perhaps, he would have that cup of coffee after all. He took out his phone, connected his wireless headphones and crossed the street. Rock music filled his void these days. He listened to Pink Floyd and Led Zeppelin like they were mantras and hummed the tunes whenever he was sad. It reminded him of his college days, days when he was single and happy and not dejected and heartbroken like the present.

As he reached the other side of the road and walked towards the coffee shop, his feet fell into a puddle.

And now my precious loafers are going to be soaking wet. Great! thought Tonmoy indignantly.

He looked at his shoes and wondered how much damage had been done to them. Getting his footwear ruined was totally unacceptable. His eternal love for shoes had made him almost penniless once. Finally Sabah had to step in and point out that the matter was slipping out of his hands. He had to bring this obsession of his under control. But what could he do? The aisles in the shoe store spoke his name and called him closer every time he went near them!

How do women manage all this? Tonmoy wondered. *How do these beings get away with so much shopping and still manage to maintain a hefty balance in their accounts?*

Perhaps, it was because of the rich husbands or boyfriends and that assumption turned his thoughts towards Sabah again.

Sabah had never spent his money like that. She would never ask for things, if she needed something she would arrange a way to purchase it herself. Tonmoy pondered if Sabah thought of him these days. The break-up had hurt a lot and in order to wound Sabah, he had said unimaginable things. At one point he had threatened to destroy himself. But that was just an empty threat to lure Sabah back into his web and she knew it all too well.

Sabah was an admirable woman. She was an artist and Tonmoy was always awed by her intellect. Unfortunately, it didn't act in his favour in their last days of togetherness. Sabah had figured him out and there was no way she would stay.

He entered the coffee shop and took his usual place in the corner. The downpour had caused people to seek shelter in nearby buildings and the glass walls of the coffee bistro had become foggy. Tonmoy fought the urge of lighting a cigarette inside. The usual chairs placed outside for smoking had been tucked away to prevent them from getting drenched.

Tonmoy ordered an Espresso and tipped the barista. Sabah always complained about such things and pointed out his excessive spending but he was never a good listener. His thoughts wandered to the day they broke up. It had happened in this very coffee shop.

Tonmoy had asked Hasan to keep Sabah company as he would be running late. Arriving on time was still a struggle for him then. Apparently, four years of college hadn't helped much in time management.

Sabah was wearing white that day. White was Tonmoy's least favourite colour. But she didn't care much about him these days. She had grown tired of him, his out of control spending and rash behaviour. Recently, Tonmoy had started borrowing money from her and she didn't know how to break it to him that his borrowings were taking a toll on her. She decided to focus her attention on Hasan instead.

"So how is life? When are you getting married?" asked Sabah while taking a small sip of her latte.

“Not much really! Laila’s still not done with her M.B.B.S but marriage is surely on the table. So, what do you think of Tonmoy? Do you expect him to propose soon?”

Sabah almost choked. “Why would I do that? I mean, why would he do that? Neither of us has talked about marriage yet.”

Hasan looked as befuddled as Sabah. This was definitely not what Tonmoy had in mind when he had offered that Hasan join him and Sabah.

Tonmoy is going to be devastated, Hasan wondered.

Sabah looked startled. She could see unexpected things happening very soon. She tried her best to smile and inquired about Hasan and his new project. Tonmoy arrived after an hour, clad in a crisp black shirt and blue jeans. He had put on a few pounds recently and the shirt seemed quite fitted around his spherical belly.

“Hello darling!” Tonmoy mused as he took the seat on the opposite side.

“All good, love?” inquired Sabah.

“Yeah, yeah! Just had a rough day giving interviews, you know?” Tonmoy replied as he took her hand and held it tightly.

Tonmoy seldom held her hand in public, Sabah was positive something was wrong this time. Hasan ordered another coffee and the small talk proceeded for a while. As the conversation grew a little serious, Tonmoy popped the question, “So Hasan, what do you think about me and Sabah? Should we get married?”

Sabah's hand stiffened. Tonmoy did not notice this, he went on ranting instead until Hasan replied, "I think you should consider Sabah's opinion first. Isn't she the one you are thinking of marrying?"

"I know what Sabah is going to say. So, I wanted your opinion first."

Hasan chuckled. "You need to set your priorities right pal, otherwise you might just lose what you have."

Tonmoy looked at Sabah. "Babe, don't I already know what you are going to say?"

"Unfortunately, you don't! We are not getting married."

The coffee cup almost fell to the floor as Tonmoy's hands trembled in shock.

"I don't think it's a good idea, given the equation we have." Sabah replied coldly.

"But don't you love me? You have given up so much for me! That's what people do for love Sabah."

"Exactly!" Sabah retorted. "That exactly shows how much you didn't love me." Tonmoy looked appalled. Hasan decided to act quickly and took Tonmoy outside for a walk before things went out of hand. He knew his childhood friend too well to know that he might create mayhem any moment and cause an uncomfortable scene in public.

They lit a cigarette and Tonmoy looked at his friend earnestly. "What is happening Hasan? Why doesn't she want to marry me? I have done everything possible to keep her happy."

"I believe Sabah has her own rationality for the refusal," Hasan replied coldly.

“But she cannot do this Hasan, she has to marry me!”

“Perhaps this attitude of yours came in the way of things. Let it be,” Hasan urged and flipped a small mint in his mouth to freshen his breath.

They returned after twenty minutes. Sabah was still sitting in the green armchair with a doleful face and she rose up as they entered.

“Let’s go home,” she urged Tonmoy.

Tonmoy obeyed without argument and they took a cab towards Lalmatia. It was a quiet ride. Tonmoy did not utter a word and neither did Sabah. As they took crossed Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue, Tonmoy asked the driver to stop. Sabah knew she had to get down. She carefully counted the money, paid her share of the fare and started walking towards home. Tonmoy would always drop her on the main road and make her walk home, be it broad daylight or twilight.

“Why do you never drop me home?” Sabah would complain and Tonmoy would always come up with an excuse.

“I feel unsafe, walking through the dark alley near my apartment. The streetlights have been unrepaired for ages.”

“You are a big girl now Sabah. You have to learn to be brave,” Tonmoy would say.

Sabah was brave. But what did bravery have to do with accompanying her when she was feeling insecure? Sabah never understood. Neither did Tonmoy.

However, today was a different day. She didn’t feel scared any more, she felt liberated. She was finally free, free from Tonmoy and his obnoxious obsession of controlling her and her

money, dictating her about what to do and what not to do and turning a deaf ear every time she asked for something. She walked with confident steps and never called Tonmoy again.

The rain had mellowed and Tonmoy looked up at the sky. It was merely a drizzle now and he decided to get up and start for home before he and his precious loafers got wet. He walked briskly to the door and stopped dead in his tracks. Sabah was standing outside in a peacock-green dress. Her hands were covered in henna and she was looking impatient. As Tonmoy contemplated leaving quickly, all the while avoiding her gaze, a tall man grabbed her arm and they made way for the coffee shop. Agony clasped Tonmoy as he stood frozen at the door.

Sabah entered happily and took the very seat that Tonmoy had occupied just moments ago. Without saying a word, Tonmoy lowered his face and walked away.

Conclusion

“The Changing Universe of Women” focuses on exploring the different dimensions of societal aspects and women’s roles in the community. Through a list of four short stories, this paper highlights the many experiences that women go through in their lives as mothers, daughters, partners and wives. The themes employed are Realism, Psychological Realism, Mystery and Love and through the incorporation of four different themes, I have tried to explore the persona of women and have presented the varied manifestations of the struggle in their daily lives.

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