

In sunshine and in shadow

Musafir's Memoir



Chapter 2: Reminiscing

I couldn't forget the women of Kothia. Their plights still haunted my unconscious mind, especially Ragho's Wife.

I vividly remember that arid and hot summer afternoon in the eastern part of India. I was running with a soccer ball on the dusty village trail. A bunch of village boys were chasing me to tackle the ball away from me. Suddenly I saw the mailman rushing on his bike with a telegram in his hand. He almost bumped into us but

managed to steer his bike away to safety. He hurled a profane remark at us for getting in his way and then made a sharp turn towards Ragho's house. I knew, at once, there was something wrong with Ragho.

Suddenly I heard Ragho's mother crying at the top of her voice, "My son is dead! Now who will take care of me? How am I going to survive in my old days? O God! Why did I worship you all my life? Is this the reward I

get from you, O Merciless! Take me to my son!"

I ran to her house. She was frantically beating her chest. She threw herself on the ground in front of her house and started rolling around hysterically. Soon, the neighbors gathered at her house. The women surrounded her. Men stood at a distance talking about Ragho's sudden demise.

Ragho's wife, who was not permitted to come outside of the house, sensed the situation and started wailing loudly. That infuriated Ragho's mother. She ran towards her house with an intention of nabbing Ragho's wife, but the neighbors controlled her. "Tell that *rundy* (prostitute) to stop shrieking. She has brought bad luck to our family. If she had any shame, she'd have killed herself by now. That disastrous rogue never brought enough dowry with her. How am I supposed to feed her for the rest of her life now? O Goddess of wealth! Help me now!"

Ragho's mother was not bashful about her feelings. "God will take care of you. Time will heal you. We don't have control over our destiny," A neighbor tried to console her.

Ragho's mother picked up Ragho's four-month-old son, who was crying for attention. She pressed him against her chest and started talking to him while wailing loudly, "Who'll take care of you and me now, baby? Who will feed us? You are too small to earn a living. O Goddess of power! Make him big and strong soon!"

No one was worried about Ragho's wife, who had just become a widow. Ragho and his wife had been married only for sixteen months. Ragho died from Cholera in a slum of Calcutta where he lived. I remembered the day when Ragho brought her to our village for the first time. She immediately became a proud possession of Ragho's

mother, a commodity. She was made to perform all the chores of the house from daybreak until the night. She would cook, clean and serve her mother-in-law. She was not allowed to have any time to herself. What was perceived to be a marriage was a life imprisonment with a chance of parole only when her mother-in-law had passed away. Her face was always covered in a veil. Ragho's mother would lift the veil slowly for the visitors to display her to them. Everyone thought that Ragho's wife was too beautiful to belong to this family, but she got what her parents' dowry could afford.

Ragho's mother, on the other hand, was enjoying her new status as a proud mother-in-law. Her mother-in-law made her do the same what Ragho's wife was doing now. It was her turn now to relax and enjoy. She was in no hurry to die. Ragho used to visit his wife two or three times a year. Both Ragho and his wife were very nice to me. Ragho's mother never gave him a chance to be alone with his wife until nightfall. I was their only go-between during the day. Ragho would give me messages for his wife and I would faithfully deliver them to her. "Ragho wants to know if you have any problems here," I asked his wife.

By nature, I used to be in a hurry. Ragho's wife always insisted that I should sit by her side and tell her the stories about Ragho and his friends. She used to grip me by my hand and say, "Why are you always in a hurry? Why don't you sit by me?" I sat by her side.

"Tell him that I am alright, but he should come to me a little early tonight," she requested. I went outside and conveyed the message to Ragho. Ragho smiled shyly.

A few few days after that Ragho had to go back to Calcutta to resume his duties. He sent letters and money orders regularly. The last message that came from him was the message of his death.

Soon I left my village for, supposedly, a modern upbringing, but Ragho's wife left a deep impact on my mind. I read about ancient slaves in social studies and which were akin to the plight of Ragho's wife. Hers was even worse than those slaves because the slaves could, at least, go outside and see the daylight. Ragho's wife couldn't.

I returned to my village a year later during the summer vacation. I visited Ragho's house. Ragho's wife looked very sick and ill fed. She was sweeping the floor at the time. She smiled to see me. Her smile formed dimples on her cheeks. Dimples were her trademark. But I also noticed a burn scar on her left cheek. She asked me to sit by her side again.

"How are you doing? You city boy!" She asked teasingly.

"I am fine. How about you?"

"Me? She laughed. I am just a maid. All I get in return is some food to eat. I am nothing more than a domestic animal," she continued, "I wasn't allowed go to Calcutta with my husband. If I did, he'd still be alive." She started to sob.

"Why didn't you go to Calcutta with Ragho?"

"You wouldn't understand. You are lucky because you are a man. We women are born to be slaves. First, we live under our parents' control and later it is the in-laws. Moreover, Ragho didn't earn enough to keep me in Calcutta."

"How did you get this burn mark on your cheek?" "Ragho's mother did that to me. One day I had an argument with her. She threatened to burn me alive," she answered with disgust.

I went back to school again, not returning to my village for a few years. I visited Ragho's house again. Ragho's mother was sitting with Ragho's son in her lap. "Where is Ragho's wife?" I asked.

"She is dead," she answered angrily.

"Really? Tell me what happened?" "That rundy was a burden to me. I didn't have money to feed her! So, I asked her to leave."

"But where did she go?" "I sent her to her parents' home. But those misers couldn't keep her too. Last I heard, she eloped with the neighbor's son and went to Calcutta with him."

"I see." I didn't know how else to react.

Seven years later I went to Calcutta on a school trip. Calcutta's railway station is a world in itself. A multitude of humanity comes through there every day as passengers, onlookers, vendors, thieves and beggars. I was late to the station. My train was about to leave. As I was running towards my coach, I bumped against a beggar in rags. I didn't have time to say sorry to her. No sooner did I enter the train than it started to pull out. I noticed the beggar in rags looking towards me. She resembled Ragho's wife. I also noticed a burn mark on her left cheek. As she smiled at me, dimples formed on her cheeks. It could have been Ragho's wife or someone else who resembled her. No matter what, how did that matter, anyway? ... **Part 2 to be continued.**