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Tesi di Laurea

Traduzione e analisi di quattro racconti da “One Step Towards the Sun – Short Stories by Women from Orissa”

Translation and Analysis of Four Short Stories from “One Step Towards the Sun – Short Stories by Women from Orissa”

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1. About the source text and the project

This thesis is the result of the application of that practice that Roman Jakobson defined *Interlingual translation*, which is “*an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language*” (Jakobson, 1959). The verbal signs in question in this case refer to a written text, more specifically to four short stories selected among the ones in *One Step towards the Sun - Short Stories by Women from Orissa*, which offers a selection of short stories written by female authors from the Indian state of Orissa and originally published from the middle of the twentieth century up to the present day. Many aspects of this volume make it peculiar and interesting as object of the practice of translation.

The short stories are set in the state of Orissa, which is located in the subcontinent’s eastern coast and which is one of the poorest states in India. Orissa has a documented history stretching back three thousand years and a literature from the eighth century. Translation plays and has played an important role in Orissa, since it was through translation of Sanskrit texts that Oriya came to be standardized.

The source text is a translation itself, since the original short stories were written in Oriya, Orissa’s official language. Therefore, the text falls within that component of literary and cultural studies in India that is Indian Literature in English Translation (ILET). ILET’s importance, given the multi-lingual composition of Indian society and the status of English as one of its two official languages, lies in the fact that it helps literary works to be enjoyed throughout the whole country and, moreover, it provides a world’s window on India. The volume considered here, in this sense, provides the point of view of many female authors on many issues regarding India, such as poverty, mental instability, religious intolerance, crime and injustice and many other matters relevant to every person—male or female, young or old, Indian or non-Indian. Several authors explore how sexual politics and role stereotyping limit the options and choices available to women to a much greater extent than for men, and, more in general, the reader gets a closer look on Indian women’s condition. As we read in the introduction of the volume:

“Female writers in particular have only recently emerged from the shadows to become visible beside their longer established male colleagues. The fact that we do not even have years of birth for our first two authors, Sushila Devi and Suprabha Kar, is telling: women here as in so many other nations have faced (and in certain cases continue to face) significant challenges to being recognized as individuals, artists and worthwhile contributors to society as a whole. It was not until the 1970s that any significant amount of writing by the women of Orissa found venues where they could make their voices heard, and much more recently that their work began to be translated for foreign audiences. One Step towards the Sun aims to engage in the ongoing ILET dialogue, playing a key part in helping establish mutually beneficial relationships between the women writers of Orissa and audiences elsewhere in India and around the world.” (Valerie Henitiuk)

The authors were all born between the turn of the twentieth century and 1996, all are women and all from the state of Orissa, “*but there is nothing essentialist about any of these stories or their finely nuanced characters. The range of authors represented offer an idiosyncratic spectrum of viewpoints, writing styles and motifs.*” (Valerie Henitiuk)

Because of the fact that the text is a translation itself, especially from Oriya, all the translating choices and all the observations in the analysis are made taking into account the impossibility of enjoying the original text and, in some way, translating the English version could be considered as a stance; as Lawrence Venuti observes:

The hierarchy of cultural practices that ranks translation lowest is grounded on romantic expressive theory and projects a Platonic metaphysics of the text, distinguishing between the authorized copy and the simullicrum that deviates from the author. (1992)

This commentary highlights the longstanding issue which devalues translation in comparison with the original, which is elevated to an almost religious rank. Choosing to translate a translation, therefore, is a way of stating that the target text is a valuable literary product, worthy of being translated, too.

As the title of this work suggests, the analysis, of both the source text and its translation, played a central role in the project. The reason behind it lies in the fact that the process of translation may be described, as Jiří Levý did in his 1967 article, as a *decision process*, a sequence of decisions by which the translator chooses from the available alternatives, applying, among others, semantic, rhythmical, stylistic criteria, since all of these aspects are variant elements which codify information, hence affecting the message conveyed by the text. The information codified by the variant, especially in the direct speech, may be diastratic and diatopic characteristics of the speaker, their psycho-emotional state and their attitude towards the interlocutor (Salmon, 2017). Narrative techniques such as the use of Point of View were taken into account, too. Such aspects were widely discussed in the analysis of each short story, highlighting their effect on the general meaning and the way they were translated into Italian using different techniques in order to have *functional equivalence*. Therefore, analysing the source text was crucial to make the decisions at the basis of the translation process.

The practice was all along made with the awareness of the ambitious nature of this project, since a good bilingualism would be required to perceive many nuances, such as register and diatopic characteristics of the Indian variety of English; moreover, the cultural distance and, in some cases, the lack of cultural correspondence prevent from having equivalence. However, the heuristic nature of the practice of translation makes it worthy of trying, and, in addition, exquisitely challenging.

Some information about the authors:

Gayatri Basu Mallik: Ruins (b. 1930) started her writing career in 1965. Her publications include Padmatola, Kaveri, and Sata Sagara Tera Nadi Pare. She has received awards such as the State Level Film Award for Best Story (1985), the Orissa Sahitya Akademi (1994), and the Orissa Lekhika Sansad (2000)

Pratibha Ray: The Ring (b. 1944) did her Masters in Education and her Ph.D. in Educational Psychology. She started her professional career as a school-teacher and later taught at various Government Colleges in Orissa. She was a Member of the Orissa Public Service Commission. Her publications include Yajnaseni, Magna Mati, Adi Bhumi, Moksha, and Shilapadma. She received the Orissa Sahitya Akademi award in 1985, the Sarala Award in 1990 and the Moorti Devi Award in 1991. The government of India conferred Padmashree on her in 2007 for her contribution to literature.

Premalata Devi: The Man of the Century (b. 1944) has retired as a Reader in Oriya from Jatani College, Jatani. She has to her credit two short story collections, Punascha Andhara and Kie Bujhe Kahaku, two anthologies of poems Prathama Swakhyara and Nishabda Juara, and two collections of essays Saraswata Samalochana and Sabujaru Dhusara Palli. She has received the Rastraduta award (1988), the Varta-Urmi Award (1989) and the Utkala Bharati Kuntala Kumari Puraskara (2008). She is, at present, the vice-president of the Lekhika Sahitya Sansad, Bhubaneswar.

Gayatri Sharaf: A Mother from Kalahandi (b. 1952) is a teacher and lives in Bolangir. She writes poetry and fiction. Her publications include Alokita Andhakar, Aaainara Janha, Nijaswa Basanta. She has received Bisuba Puraskar.

Ruins

Gayatri Basu Mallik

Tr. Snehaprava Das

‘No, my boy, one shouldn’t catch the birds’.

A woman’s voice. It came from somewhere nearby.

‘...I have left my little one sitting alone at the canal bank’.

‘No, don’t catch the birds’.

It was the same voice again. I looked around curiously.

‘The bus stops here only up to three o’clock? But that’s too little time.’ I thought aloud.

‘It won’t leave before three o’clock, sir. Have some sweets. The sweetmeats in our shop are the best in this area. You are here to see the sun temple of Konark, I guess. Haven’t you seen it before?’ The man at the counter of the sweetmeat shop, who probably heard me soliloquising, asked me.

‘Only once when I was a child. I came with my parents, but I don’t remember much. Studies preoccupied most of my time. Now that my post-graduation examination is over, I have found some leisure to visit the place again after quite a long interval’, I replied.

‘No, my boy, don’t you catch the birds.’ The woman spoke again.

My searching gaze wandered after the voice that kept on repeating the strange sentence.

To the left of the shop there was a thick growth of *kia* shrubs. A woman sat by it. There was a bundle of rags, and a metal plate with its enamel coating peeled off at several places lay nearby. A thick mop of rough, wiry hair dishevelled by the wind capped her head. There was a vacant, faraway look in her sunken, mad eyes.

‘Babu, where are you from?’

The shopkeeper asked. I turned to look at him. ‘Cuttack’, I answered shortly.

‘Don’t you catch the birds, my boy.’ Again I turned my face to the ugly looking, mad woman.

Why did my eyes keep returning to that repulsive creature, I asked myself. The way she kept on repeating the peculiar sentence disturbed me. I was no longer able to suppress my curiosity. I looked at the shopkeeper.

‘What is it that the mad woman keeps on saying—“don’t you catch the birds,” and “my son is left sitting on the canal bank”; what does it mean?’ I asked him. A dark shadow of sorrow crossed his

Rovine

Gayatri Basu Mallik

Tr. Snehaprava Das

“No, bambino mio, non si devono prendere gli uccellini”.

Era la voce di una donna. Veniva da qualche parte, lì vicino.

“...Ho lasciato il mio piccolo seduto da solo sulla riva del canale”.

“No, non prendere gli uccellini”.

Di nuovo quella voce. Mi guardai intorno, curioso.

“La corriera passa di qui solo fino alle tre? Ma è prestissimo”, pensai ad alta voce.

“Non partirà prima delle tre in punto, signore. Prenda dei dolcetti. Le caramelle del nostro negozio sono le migliori della zona. Lei è qui per visitare il tempio del sole di Konark, immagino. L’aveva mai visto?”, mi chiese l’uomo alla cassa del negozio di caramelle, il quale aveva probabilmente sentito il mio monologo.

“Solo una volta, da bambino, insieme ai miei genitori, ma non ricordo molto. Sono stato impegnato a studiare per la maggior parte del tempo. Ora che ho passato l’esame del master, finalmente ho un po’ di tempo libero per tornare qui in visita dopo tutto questo tempo”, risposi.

“No, bambino mio, non prendere gli uccellini”, disse di nuovo quella donna.

Il mio sguardo vagò in cerca di quella voce che continuava a ripetere quella strana frase.

Alla sinistra del negozio c’era una fitta crescita di arbusti di *kia*. Una donna sedeva lì accanto. C’era un mucchio di stracci, e un piatto di metallo con la smaltatura scrostata in diversi punti, adagiato lì vicino. Capelli ispidi e scompigliati coprivano la sua testa, come una vecchia scopa fitta e arruffata. Nei suoi occhi folli e infossati c’era uno sguardo perso e lontano.

“Da dove viene, Babu?” chiese il negoziante.

Mi girai per guardarlo. “Da Cuttack”, risposi rapidamente.

“Non prendere gli uccellini, bambino mio” Mi voltai nuovamente verso quella pazza dall’aspetto orribile.

Mi chiesi perché i miei occhi continuassero a tornare a quella creatura repellente. Il modo in cui continuava a ripetere quella frase così strana mi inquietava. Non fui più in grado di contenere la curiosità. Guardai il negoziante.

“Che cos’è che continua a dire la pazza – “non prendere gli uccellini” e “mio figlio è da solo, seduto sulla riva del canale”: che cosa significa?”, gli chiesi.

Il suo volto si scurì di tristezza mentre mi rispondeva. “E’ una storia molto triste, signore, oltre che lunga. Vuole sentirla? Ma dopo non le resterà molto tempo per vedere il tempio”. La curiosità mi prese ancora più forte.

“Potrei trovare un’altra domenica più avanti per un’altra visita. Vorrei sapere. Mi dica della donna – se non le dispiace, ovviamente”.

face as he answered. 'It is quite sad a story, sir, and a long one too. Would you like to hear it? But there won't be much time left for seeing the temple after that.' Curiosity gripped me even more strongly.

'I shall find me a free Sunday sometime later for another visit. I want to know. Tell me about her—of course, if it does not trouble you.'

'Why should it trouble me?' said the man at the shop. 'It would be a waste of time for you rather. You will have to return without seeing the temple.'

'She is Champa,' the shopkeeper began. 'Her husband, Magunia, worked somewhere in Calcutta. They had no land of their own. Champa and her three sons lived on the money her husband sent to her. But Magunia had made his wife promise not to step out of home to work as long as he lived.'

'Where did she live?'— I cut in.

'Not far away from this place, a village called Kunei; that is where they lived.'

'Wouldn't you give me two of those sweetmeats?' Someone spoke behind me. I looked back. It was that mad woman again. She stood there in front of the shop stretching out a pathetic hand.

The shopkeeper lifted a small stick and waved it at her threateningly, 'Go away or else—'.

'It's all right. Don't give if you don't want to. I must hurry. I have left my little one sitting on the bank of the canal.' She clutched the bundle of rags under her sleeve and shifted the flaky enamel plate from her right hand to her left, in which she already held a small stick. Clutching both things together in her left hand, she walked away.

'No, my boy, one shouldn't catch birds', the woman kept on muttering those words and scratched hard at her head with the long fingernails of her right hand as she moved on. Lice perhaps, I thought.

I bought two sweetmeats from the shop and half ran, half walked to reach her. 'Here, take these', I said, holding them out. She fixed her expressionless, sunken eyes on my face for a moment, grabbed the sweets and disappeared round the turning. I stood there for a while looking after her, and then returned to the shop.

'What then?' I asked the man.

'Magunia wrote letters to her. And she used to get them read by every literate person in the village. It was as if she was not satisfied with listening to the contents just once. She wanted to hear them again and again.'

It was Nabaghana, Magunia's cousin who worked in Calcutta, too, who brought the news of his death. Magunia, he said, suffered from some deadly fever for a few days and finally succumbed to it. Champa did not shed one teardrop. Her reflexes seemed to have been paralysed. She sat still like a wooden statue, her eyes empty. She remained like that for two days. Late on the third night she broke into a loud wailing. It was a heart-rending sound and there seemed to be no stopping it.

“Perché dovrebbe dispiacermi?” disse il negoziante. “Sarebbe una perdita di tempo per lei, piuttosto. Dovrà tornare indietro senza aver visto il tempio.” La curiosità mi afferrò ancora più forte.

“Lei è Champa,” iniziò. “Suo marito, Magunia, lavorava da qualche parte a Calcutta. Non erano proprietari di un terreno. Lei e i tre figli vivevano dei soldi che il marito le inviava. Ma Magunia aveva fatto promettere a sua moglie di non uscire mai di casa per lavorare finché lui fosse stato in vita.” “Dove viveva lei?”, lo interruppi.

“Non lontano da qui, in un villaggio che si chiama Kunei; vivevano lì.”

“Mi darebbe due di quelle caramelle?”, disse qualcuno dietro di me. Mi voltai. Era di nuovo quella pazza. Stava lì, di fronte al negozio, tendendo una mano in cerca di compassione. Il negoziante prese un bastoncino e lo agitò minacciandola, “vattene, altrimenti...”.

“D'accordo, non me dia se non vuole. Devo sbrigarmi. Ho lasciato il mio piccolo seduto sulla riva del canale”. Si mise il mucchio di stracci sotto la manica e si passò il piatto con lo smalto scrostato dalla mano destra alla sinistra, nella quale aveva già un piccolo bastoncino. Stringendo entrambe le cose nella mano sinistra, se ne andò.

“No, bambino mio, non si prendono gli uccellini”, la donna continuò a biasciare quelle parole e si grattò forte la testa con le lunghe unghie della mano destra mentre se ne andava. Forse aveva i pidocchi, pensai.

Comprai due caramelle dal negozio e la raggiunsi, a tratti correndo, a tratti camminando. “Ecco, prenda queste”, dissi, porgendogliele. Lei fissò i suoi occhi incavati e privi di espressione sul mio volto per un istante, prese le caramelle e scomparve dietro la curva. Restai lì un attimo a guardarla andare via e poi tornai al negozio.

“Poi?”, chiesi al negoziante.

“Magunia le scriveva delle lettere. E lei se le faceva leggere da tutte le persone alfabetizzate del villaggio. Era come se non le bastasse ascoltarne i contenuti una sola volta. Voleva ascoltarli ancora e ancora.

Fu Nabaghana, il cugino di Magunia, il quale lavorava a Calcutta, a portare notizia della sua morte. Disse che Magunia aveva avuto una febbre terribile per alcuni giorni e che, alla fine, era mancato. Champa non versò neanche una lacrima. Sembrava che i suoi riflessi fossero rimasti paralizzati. Restò seduta immobile, come una statua di legno, con gli occhi vuoti. Rimase così per due giorni. La terza sera, tardi, scoppiò in un pianto rumoroso. Era un suono straziante e sembrava che nulla potesse fermarlo.

Passarono i giorni. Champa dovette rompere la sua reclusione e cercare un lavoro. Fece dei lavoretti come domestica nelle case di alcune persone danarose del villaggio. Si alzava presto al mattino, e passava da una casa all'altra per lavorare. Guadagnava appena il necessario per dare un poco da mangiare alla sua famiglia di quattro persone. Piangere la morte del marito nel cuore della notte era diventata un'abitudine.

Days went by. Champa had to come out of her seclusion and seek a livelihood. She did odd jobs of domestic help in the houses of some moneyed people in the village. She used to get up quite early in the morning and went working from one house to another. She earned just enough to feed a handful to her family of four. Mourning the death of her husband in the dead of the night had become a part of her daily routine.

Malati, her elder sister, came with her two daughters. She had brought betel-leaves, areca-nuts, tobacco-powder, and also new clothes for the children.

“I can see how difficult it is for you to run the household all alone”, Malati said to her sister as she prepared to leave for her home after a few days’ stay. “If you agree, I shall adopt one of your sons. The second one maybe, what do you say?”

Champa stared at her sister for a long while. “Now I know why you came here,” she replied with a sneer. She pulled her sons to herself and held them close. “I don’t have a son to give you”, she said with a finality to her voice. “Their father is watching me from heaven. What would he say? He would think that Champa was so selfish that she started giving away my sons as soon as I left. Wouldn’t he? I can’t do that.”

Malati returned with a heavy heart.

Haria and Lavani, Magunia’s younger brother and his wife, implored Champa to come and live with them. The two brothers had been separated soon after Haria’s marriage. Haria and his wife claimed a larger share of the land and all the household goods. Champa had quarrelled with them. But Magunia pulled Champa into the house and tried to mollify her. “I’ll get you everything you want. Please do not make a scene. Let them take what they like.” He said soothingly. Champa obeyed her husband. But the cold hostility did not die. Years followed one another. Lavani could not give Haria an heir even after many years of marriage. The curse of being childless killed all the happiness in their life. Champa lived with them till the funeral rites were over. Haria pleaded earnestly to stop his widowed sister-in-law from living alone. “Sister-in-law, please don’t go. Let us demolish the wall in the middle of the house and stay together. We are family after all,” he said solicitously. “I don’t have a child of my own to make a claim on my property. These kids are ours too.”

But Champa hadn’t forgotten, nor had she forgiven the unjust and adamant demands of her brother-in-law and his wife.

“I wouldn’t do that,” she replied arrogantly. “That is your property. You can throw it to the wolves or let it go down the gutter for all I care. People will think that I have come to live on your earnings after the mishap befell me. I can’t stomach such comments. I would rather work as a daily labourer and rear up my children on my own.”

Lavani, too, begged Champa to forget the past and come to live with them. “Off with your honeyed words,” Champa snapped at her sister-in-law.

The aggrieved couple finally gave up. Champa strove to start life afresh.

She worked in the houses of Anam Das and the Pattnaik family of the neighbouring village.

Malati, la sorella maggiore di Champa, venne con le due figlie. Portò foglie e noci di betel, polvere di tabacco e anche vestiti nuovi per i bambini.

“Capisco quanto sia difficile per te gestire la casa completamente da sola”, disse Malati a sua sorella mentre si preparava per tornare a casa dopo una visita di qualche giorno. “Se fossi d’accordo, potrei adottare uno dei tuoi figli. Per esempio il secondo, che cosa ne pensi?”

Champa la guardò per un bel po’. “Ora ho capito perché sei venuta qui,” rispose, storcendo la bocca. Portò i figli a sé e li strinse forte. “Non ho figli da darti”, disse, ponendo fine all’argomento. “Il loro padre mi guarda da lassù. Che cosa direbbe? Penserebbe che Champa è stata così egoista da iniziare a dare via i figli appena se n’è andato. Non credi? Non posso farlo”.

Malati tornò a casa con la morte nel cuore.

Haria e Lavani, il fratello minore di Magunia e la moglie, implorarono Champa di andare a vivere con loro. I due fratelli non erano più in relazione sin da poco dopo il matrimonio di Haria. Lui e la moglie rivendicavano una parte più grande di terreno e di tutti i beni della famiglia. Champa aveva litigato con loro. Ma Magunia l’aveva portata in casa e aveva cercato di ammorbidirla. “Ti darò tutto quello che vuoi. Per favore, non fare scene. Lascia che prendano quello che vogliono”, disse lui, cercando di calmarla. Champa obbedì al marito. Ma la fredda ostilità non svanì. Gli anni passarono. Lavani non riuscì a dare a Haria un erede, nonostante tutti gli anni di matrimonio. La maledizione della mancanza di figli distrusse le loro possibilità di vivere una vita felice. Champa visse con loro fino a che non finirono i riti funerari.

Haria implorò con il cuore in mano la cognata ormai vedova di non vivere più da sola. “Cognata, ti prego, non andartene. Lasciaci demolire il muro che divide la casa per stare insieme a te. Siamo una famiglia, dopotutto” disse, sollecitamente. “Non ho figli miei per rivendicare la mia proprietà. Questi bambini sono anche figli nostri.”

Ma Champa non aveva dimenticato, né aveva perdonato le pretese ostinate e ingiustificate del cognato e di sua moglie.

“Mai,” rispose con arroganza. “Quella è la vostra proprietà. Potete gettarla in pasto ai lupi o buttarla giù per la grondaia, per quanto mi riguarda. La gente penserà che io sia venuta a vivere a vostre spese dopo quello che mi è capitato. Non riesco a digerire certi commenti. Preferirei fare la bracciante ogni giorno e crescere i miei figli da sola.”

Anche Lavani pregò Champa di lasciarsi il passato alle spalle e di andare a vivere con loro. “Basta con le moine,” sbottò Champa con la cognata.

La coppia, afflitta, a quel punto si arrese. Champa provò a ricominciare la sua vita da capo.

Lavorò nelle case delle famiglie Anam Das e Pattnaik, nel villaggio vicino. Anam Das, il vecchio bramino, aveva messo i suoi occhi avidi sulla terra di proprietà di Champa. Nascondendo il suo vero obiettivo dietro una premura fittizia, il vecchio tentò di persuadere Champa a vivere in casa sua.

Anam Das, the old Brahmin, had his greedy eyes on Champa's homestead land. Hiding his true motive under feigned concern, the old man tried to persuade Champa to come and live in the premises of his house.

"We have a big outhouse. Why don't you move in here with your sons? That would save you the long walk. What do you think?"

Champa would glare at the old Brahmin. "Don't you try to act smart," she would retaliate with vehemence. "I know you have been eyeing the plot for a long time. You are eager to take my homestead land within the bounds of your own threshing yard, no? I will never let that happen as long as I am alive. Never try to deceive me with your cunning. You know me well—I can forget all the propriety of the master-servant relationship."

Das was a clever man. He could immediately realise that he had touched the tail of a cobra. He tried to amend his words.

"Look at the crazy woman!", he said with feigned affection. 'It seems you have totally misunderstood my intention. I was concerned because I thought it must be quite painful for you to walk that distance every day.'

"Enough", Champa jeered. "Cut the act, and keep your kindness to yourself."

Haria, her brother-in-law, appealed to her again. "Sister-in-law, I shall not compel you to live together with us if you do not like it. But won't you let me bring up one of your sons? The second son—let me adopt him. Would it be proper if I go for an heir outside the family?"

Champa glared at him. "I don't care where you get one," she said belligerently. "I would rather have them starve to death than live with you. How your brother had wished you to show a little gesture of affection to his children! Often he used to tell me, 'Haria had never even cared to say a word of love to my children, let alone give them anything.' How had he longed to see you taking his sons in your arms! Now that he is no more, your heart floods with love for them, eh? I shall never let something that did not happen when he was alive, happen after his death. Get away from here." Champa dismissed the subject.

The youngest son was two years old and the eldest nine, Champa calculated. It was winter; she would keep the eldest son in Padhan's house until the end of autumn. The boy would take their cattle out to graze. She had sorted it out with Padhan. His food and clothing would be on the house and Padhan would pay eight rupees a year as salary. The arrangement, Champa thought, could bring an end to their troubles.

My elder brother's wife was a good friend of Champa and the poor woman shared all her joys and sorrows with my sister-in-law. I heard Champa's story from her only.' The shop-owner said and paused a little.

'Padhan employed Sania, Champa's eldest son, as the cowherd boy', the shop-keeper resumed his tale. 'A canal was newly dug at the end of the village. The canal was lined with tall trees of mango and jamu berry on both sides. Sania took the cows to the shrubby forest beyond the bank of the canal to graze. Mania, Champa's second son, who found life dull without his elder brother, often

“Abbiamo una grande depondance. Perché non vieni ad abitare qui con i tuoi figli? Ti risparmierebbe la lunga camminata. Che cosa ne pensi?”

Champa gelò il vecchio bramino con lo sguardo. “Non fare il furbo,” reagì con veemenza. “Lo so che stai studiando un piano da molto tempo. Non aspetti altro che estendere fino alla mia proprietà i confini del tuo cortile, vero? Non te lo permetterò mai, finché sarò in vita. Non cercare mai più di raggirarmi con l’astuzia. Mi conosci bene, sono capace di lasciare da parte il decoro della relazione tra servo e padrone.”

Das era un uomo scaltro. Capi all’istante di aver toccato la coda di un cobra. Provò a correggere le sue parole.

“Guarda la pazza!”, disse con un affetto simulato. “Sembra che tu abbia frainteso del tutto le mie intenzioni. Ero preoccupato perché pensavo che fosse pesante per te camminare così tanto ogni giorno.”

“Basta”, urlò Champa. “Finiscila, e tieniti la tua gentilezza per te.”

Haria, suo cognato, si rivolse nuovamente a lei. “Cognata, non posso costringerti a vivere con noi se non ti aggrada. Ma perché non mi permetti di crescere uno dei tuoi figli? Il secondo, lascia che io lo adotti. Sarebbe opportuno se cercassi un erede al di fuori della famiglia?”

Champa gli lanciò uno sguardo truce. “Non mi interessa dove lo cerchi.” disse, ostile. “Preferirei che morissero di fame piuttosto che vivere con voi. Come avrebbe desiderato tuo fratello che tu avessi mostrato anche un piccolo gesto d’affetto ai suoi figli! Spesso mi diceva, “Haria non si è mai premurato di dire una parola affettuosa ai miei bambini, figuriamoci dare loro qualcosa”. Come desiderava vederti prendere i suoi figli in braccio! Ora che lui non c’è più, il tuo cuore straripa d’amore per loro, vero? Non permetterò mai che, qualcosa che non è mai accaduta quando era vivo, accada dopo la sua morte. Vattene.” Champa chiuse l’argomento.

Il figlio più piccolo aveva due anni e il più grande nove, calcolò Champa. Era inverno; avrebbe tenuto il più grande a casa Padhan fino alla fine dell’autunno. Il bambino avrebbe portato il loro bestiame al pascolo. Si era accordata così con Padhan. Padhan gli avrebbe garantito cibo e vestiti e gli avrebbe pagato uno stipendio di otto rupie l’anno. L’accordo, pensava Champa, avrebbe potuto porre fine ai loro problemi.

La moglie di mio fratello maggiore era molto amica di Champa e quella povera donna confidava a mia cognata tutte le sue gioie e i suoi dolori. Ho sentito questa storia solo da lei”, disse il negoziante, per poi interrompere un attimo il racconto.

“Padhan assunse Sania, il figlio più grande di Champa, come bovaro”, riprese il negoziante. “Era stato appena scavato un canale alla fine del villaggio. Era contornato da alti alberi di mango e bacche di jamu da ambo i lati. Sania portava le mucche al pascolo nella foresta di arbusti oltre la sponda del canale. Mania, il secondogenito di Champa, che si annoiava senza il fratello maggiore, spesso lo accompagnava nella giungla. Correva dietro alle mucche, blaterando allegramente con un bastoncino

accompanied him to the jungle. He ran after the cows, prattling happily and carrying a small stick in his tiny hand. Both the brothers played in the jungle till sundown and then returned to the village with the cows. Days went by and summer arrived. Fruit began to ripen in the trees. Birds laid eggs under the thickets. The brothers kept a close watch over the eggs and as soon as a baby bird came out of the egg they took it home. Despite all their care and vigilance the little birds could not escape the cat's lethal clutches. The birds disappeared in the morning. Only a torn leg of one or a few tender plumes of another lay here and there as though to testify their presence on the previous evening. Champa warned her sons not to indulge in such activities. "No, my boys, one shouldn't catch the birds", she advised. "Why in the name of God are you playing with precious lives?" The boys turned a deaf ear to their mother's admonitions and returned home with another bunch of chicks the next evening. "No, my darlings, you should never catch the birds", Champa's reprimands were heard again. And this went on regularly for days together.

It was noontime. Champa sat in the courtyard of her house boiling in an earthen cauldron the five measures of paddy, which she had brought from the Pattnaik family. Her youngest son sat playing nearby. Gopia Pana, who cut canes from the jungle bordering the canal, came running. He tried to say something but the fast running had left him gasping for breath and words just spluttered out of him. Champa stared at him in surprise unable to make head or tail out of what he was saying. It took some time for Gopia to get hold of himself. "Come immediately with me", he urged Champa when he was able to speak clearly. "Won't you tell me what the matter is?" Champa demanded. "Your sons were catching birds in the undergrowth. I was busy cutting canes a little away from them. The younger one suddenly let out a loud scream. I rushed to see what happened. The elder one was lying unconscious near the tree and the younger one was writhing in pain. His body is beginning to turn blue. Don't waste any time. Come soon." Gopia ran out of the house. "Oh, my God!" Champa uttered in abject terror and, scooping up the baby boy in her arms, ran blindly after him. It takes no time for news to spread in the air of a small village like ours. Soon the people of the village gathered in the jungle. I, too, was among them. We were just in time to see a cobra that looked like a long wire of gold slithering into the shrubs.

Not wasting even a moment, Haria went away on his bicycle to fetch the village doctor. He came back almost immediately with the man. Champa sat there silently caressing the heads of her sons. The two brothers (like Rama and Lakshman) lay unconscious on the forest floor. Their bodies were turning blue. The best efforts of the doctor to neutralise the effect of the poison did not yield any result. Haria and his wife wailed and beat their chests. Champa was turned to stone. Not one tear came out of her eyes. After a long time Lavani lifted Champa by the hand. Champa got up obediently without protest. "Why are you going with them? We should go straight to the cremation-ground with the bodies," someone from amongst us said to Haria. Sobbing loudly, Haria threw himself on ground once more. Suddenly Lavani said, "Sister, where is your youngest son?" Champa was startled out of her trance for a moment and turned her eyes towards the canal bank. "Do you hear me?" Lavani shouted at her husband— "Find out where the youngest boy has gone!" We all stood flabbergasted. The little boy was nowhere in sight. We rushed to the bank, leaving behind the bodies in the jungle. We threw a net into the water and made a frantic search. The body was finally fished out of water some two kilometres away from the bank of the canal. It was too late by that time.

Champa sat like a lifeless statue. Her eyes were dry. Nor did she utter a single word. She did not bathe or brush her teeth unless someone made her do it. She did not eat a morsel of food unless someone fed her by force. She remained like that for six long months, and suddenly one day she

nella manina. I due fratelli giocavano nella giungla fino al tramonto e poi tornavano al villaggio con le mucche. I giorni passarono e arrivò l'estate. I frutti iniziarono a maturare sugli alberi. Gli uccelli deponevano le uova sotto le fratte. I fratelli tennero sotto un'attenta osservazione le uova e, appena nacque un uccellino, lo portarono a casa. Nonostante tutte le loro cure e attenzioni, gli uccellini non riuscirono a scampare i letali artigli del gatto. Gli uccellini scomparvero la mattina. Restarono qua e là solo una zampetta spezzata di uno o qualche morbida piuma di un altro, come per testimoniare la loro presenza la sera precedente. Champa disse ai suoi figli di non indugiare in attività simili. "No, bambini, non si devono prendere gli uccellini", consigliò. "Per l'amor del cielo, si può sapere perché state giocando con delle preziosissime vite?" I bambini fecero orecchie da mercante alle ammonizioni della madre, e tornarono a casa con un altro mucchio di uccellini la sera successiva. "No, cari, non dovrete prendere gli uccellini", si sentirono di nuovo i rimproveri di Champa. E di nuovo tutto questo si ripeté regolarmente per diversi giorni.

Era mezzogiorno. Champa era seduta nel cortile della sua casa e bolliva, in un calderone di terracotta, le cinque porzioni di risone che aveva portato a casa dalla famiglia Pattnaik. Il suo figlio più piccolo era seduto lì vicino a giocare. Gopia Pana, che tagliava canne nella giungla ai margini del canale, arrivò correndo. Tentò di dire qualcosa, ma aveva corso così veloce che era senza fiato e le parole uscirono farfugliate dalla sua bocca. Champa lo fissò stupita, senza capire nulla di quanto stesse dicendo. Ci volle un po' perché Gopia si rimettesse in sesto. "Vieni subito", sollecitò Champa, appena fu in grado di parlare in modo comprensibile. "Perché non mi dici che cosa sta succedendo?" chiese Champa. "I tuoi figli stavano prendendo gli uccellini dai cespugli. Io ero impegnato a tagliare le canne poco lontano. Il più piccolo improvvisamente ha gettato un urlo fortissimo. Sono corso a vedere che cosa fosse successo. Il più grande era a terra, svenuto, il più piccolo si stava contorcendo dal dolore. Sta iniziando a diventare blu. Non perdiamo altro tempo. Vieni subito." Gopia corse fuori dalla casa. "Oh mio Dio!" urlò Champa nel terrore, e, prendendo il piccolo in braccio, seguì ciecamente Gopia di corsa. Le notizie si diffondono in un istante in un villaggio piccolo come il nostro. Presto gli abitanti si riunirono nella giungla. Anch'io ero lì. Eravamo giusto in tempo per vedere un cobra che sembrava una corda d'oro scomparire strisciando tra gli arbusti.

Senza perdere neanche un istante, Haria andò con la bicicletta a prendere il dottore del villaggio. Tornò quasi immediatamente con lui. Champa sedeva lì, silenziosamente, accarezzando le teste dei suoi figli. I due fratelli (come Rama e Lakshman) giacevano privi di sensi a terra. I loro corpi stavano diventando blu. I massimi sforzi del dottore per contrastare l'effetto del veleno non diedero alcun risultato. Haria e sua moglie piangevano e si battevano il petto. Champa era pietrificata. Non versò neanche una lacrima. Dopo tanto tempo, Lavani tirò su Champa per la mano. Champa si alzò obbedientemente e senza protestare. "Perché stai andando con loro? Dovremmo andare direttamente a cremare i corpi", disse ad Haria qualcuno che era tra noi. Piangendo rumorosamente, Haria si gettò a terra di nuovo. Improvvisamente, Lavani disse, "Sorella, dov'è il piccolo?" Champa fu colta di sorpresa nella sua catalessi per un istante e volse lo sguardo verso le sponde del canale. "Mi hai sentito?", urlò Lavani a suo marito. "Cerca il piccolo!" Rimanemmo tutti di stucco. Il bambino non si vedeva da nessuna parte. Corremmo al canale, lasciando i corpi nella giungla. Gettammo una rete nell'acqua e avviammo una ricerca frenetica. Il corpo alla fine fu pescato dall'acqua circa due chilometri dalla sponda del canale. Ormai era troppo tardi.

spoke. The first sentence she spoke was, “No, you shouldn’t catch the birds, my boy.” After an hour or so she spoke another, “I have left my son sitting on the canal bank.” And thereafter she kept repeating those two sentences like a litany. She has been doing that for the last ten years.

Haria and Lavani were looking after her. But she ran away from home. She bit and scratched them when they tried to stop her. She did not return for many years. Some people of her village claimed to have seen her in the vicinity. They had seen Champa, they said, sleeping under a tree at one time or drinking gruel at someone’s doorstep at another. She came here some three years ago, and since then she has been roving aimlessly around. She begs people for food. One might hand her out something to eat or turn her away for all the reaction she showed. That greedy old

Brahmin, Anam Das, God knows by what foul means, obtained Champa’s thumb-print on a stamp-paper and declared his ownership over her homestead plot. He encroached upon her threshing-yard. “Champa sold me the plot,” he insisted when Haria tried to protest. Haria did not fight the case in a court of law. “There is no heir in our family the land could be bequeathed to,” he said sorrowfully. “Let that swindling Brahmin have it.”

The shop-keeper stopped. ‘This is the story of Champa. Quite a moving one, isn’t it, sir?’ He looked at me. I looked at my wristwatch. It was still twenty minutes to three. I looked around, but Champa was nowhere in sight. A deep breath heaved out of me. Suddenly my eyes returned to the thick *kia* shrub near the sweetmeat shop, and she lay there, asleep. I was surprised. She had reached the bush behind the shop so silently that I had not had the slightest inkling of her return. A shadow of gloom swept over me leaving me restless and utterly disturbed. Had she been able to cry her heart out, she might perhaps not have lost her mental balance, I thought ruefully. Perhaps her madness was a blessing in disguise, I decided on second thought. It would have been a terrible ordeal to bear the enormity of her loss with a sane mind.

Quickly I went into a nearby hotel and brought a meal of rice, dal and fish curry. Carrying the food I went to the place where she slept. ‘Champa’, I called. She opened her eyes and looked at me. I showed her the food and pointed at her plate. She held out the plate obediently, her gaze still fixed on my face. I placed the food items neatly on her plate. Not waiting for even a moment, Champa began eating. She gobbled up the food as if she had been hungry for years. ‘She has not eaten with such contentment for years, sir,’ the shopkeeper said. A mood of deep melancholy gripped me as I watched her eating like that.

Little time was left before the bus would leave. At the sound of the horn, I turned and walked towards it. Before entering the bus, I turned and glanced back at Champa. She sat still near the sweetmeat shop, leaning on a post.

I had begun my journey to Konark in a cheerful mood, looking forward to witnessing a testament to architectural excellence. I had come here to see beautiful dreams carved in stone, an artistic phenomenon that twelve hundred sculptors had given their lifetime’s effort to create. I had not enough time to take a close look at it. I looked from a distance at the remains of an aura of grandeur the temple had once worn. It stood like a mute witness to a glorious legend in sculpture.

But I did have a very, very close view of an image of a pathetic creature that the mysterious Creator had sculpted with His own hands. I heard the heart-rending story of that poor creature. Champa might not be mute as the temple of Konark. But the fathomless agony underlying the few sentences she

Champa sedeva senza vita, come una statua. Aveva gli occhi asciutti. Non pronunciava neppure una parola. Né si lavava o spazzolava i denti, a meno che qualcuno non la costringesse. Non mangiava neanche un boccone a meno che qualcuno non la imboccasse di forza. Rimase così per sei lunghi mesi, e all'improvviso, un giorno, parlò. La prima frase che disse fu: "No, bimbo mio, non devi prendere gli uccellini." Dopo un'ora circa ne disse un'altra: "Ho lasciato mio figlio seduto sulla riva del canale." Dopodiché, continuò a ripetere quelle due frasi come una litania. Continua così da dieci anni.

Haria e Lavani si occupavano di lei. Ma lei scappò di casa. Quando cercarono di fermarla, li morse e li graffiò. Non tornò per molti anni. Alcune persone del suo villaggio dicevano di averla vista nelle vicinanze. Dicevano di aver visto Champa dormire sotto un albero una volta, un'altra volta bere brodo sulla porta di casa di qualcuno. Venne qui tre anni fa all'incirca, e da quel momento girovaga senza meta. Elemosina cibo dai passanti. La gente non sa se darle qualcosa da mangiare o se mandarla via, per tutte le reazioni che ha avuto. Quel vecchio avido bramino, Anam Das, Dio solo sa con quali mezzi scellerati abbia ottenuto l'impronta digitale di Champa su un timbro e si sia dichiarato proprietario del suo terreno. Invaso la sua aia. "Me l'ha venduta Champa," insistette quando Haria cercò di protestare. Haria non fece causa legale. "Non abbiamo eredi in famiglia a cui poter lasciare il terreno," disse addolorato. "Lascia che lo prenda quel truffatore del bramino."

Il negoziante si fermò. "Questa è la storia di Champa. Commovente, vero, signore?" mi diede un'occhiata. Guardai l'orologio. Mancavano ancora venti minuti alle tre. Mi guardai intorno, ma non vedevo Champa da nessuna parte. Feci un respiro profondo. Il mio sguardo tornò bruscamente al fitto arbusto di kia vicino al negozio, ed eccola lì sdraiata, che dormiva. Ero sorpreso. Si era spostata lì così silenziosamente che non mi ero minimamente accorto che fosse tornata. Un'ombra tenebrosa scese su di me lasciandomi irrequieto e molto turbato. Se fosse stata in grado di piangere tutto il suo dolore, forse non avrebbe perso l'equilibrio mentale, pensai mestamente. Forse la sua follia era una benedizione sotto mentite spoglie, decisi, ripensandoci. Sarebbe stato un calvario terribile sopportare l'enormità della sua perdita con la mente lucida.

Andai velocemente nell'hotel vicino e presi una porzione di riso, dahl e pesce al curry. Tenendola in mano, andai dove stava dormendo. "Champa", la chiamai. Aprì gli occhi e mi guardò. Le mostrai il pasto e indicai il suo piatto. Obbediente, con lo sguardo ancora fisso sul mio volto, me lo porse. Vi misi il cibo con cura. Senza aspettare neanche un secondo, Champa iniziò a mangiare. Trangugiò il cibo come se fosse stata affamata per anni. "Sono anni che non mangia con così tanto piacere, signore," disse il negoziante. Un profondo senso di tristezza mi pervase mentre la guardavo mangiare in quel modo.

Mancava poco alla partenza della corriera. Al suono del clacson, mi voltai e mi incamminai verso di essa. Prima di salire, volsi lo sguardo indietro, a Champa. Stava seduta immobile vicino al negozio, appoggiata a un palo.

Avevo iniziato il mio viaggio verso Konark con l'animo spensierato, impaziente di vedere con i miei occhi una dimostrazione di eccellenza architettonica. Ero venuto qui per vedere sogni meravigliosi scolpiti nella pietra, un fenomeno artistico che milleduecento scultori avevano creato grazie allo

uttered had the power to turn me dumb. Instead of witnessing the grand ruins of a stone structure, I saw the ruins of real flesh and blood. All the way back I kept asking myself whether or not I should regret that.

sforzo di una vita intera. Non avevo avuto abbastanza tempo per poterlo vedere per bene. Avevo guardato da lontano i resti di un'aura di grandezza che il tempio aveva portato in passato. Era come una testimonianza muta di una gloriosa leggenda della scultura.

Ma avevo invece visto molto, molto da vicino, l'immagine di una compassionevole creatura scolpita direttamente dalle mani del misterioso Creatore. Avevo sentito la storia straziante di quella povera creatura. Champa forse non era muta come il tempio di Konark. Ma la profondissima agonia che giaceva sotto le poche frasi che pronunciava avevano la capacità di ammutolire me. Anziché testimoniare le grandiose rovine di una struttura di pietra, avevo visto la rovina di una persona in carne e ossa. Lungo tutto il mio viaggio di ritorno continuai a chiedermi se avessi dovuto o meno rimpiangerne.

The Ring

Pratibha Ray

Tr. Bikram K. Das

He lay flat on the hospital floor, undisturbed by the hum of visitors, the traffic of nurses and attendants, and the stench of disinfectant, even the buzzing of the flies that swarmed around his face. The other inmates of the ward, denied sleep by their assorted pains, aches and other complaints, looked at him enviously as he slumbered blissfully through the afternoon.

Overcrowding everywhere, from maternity ward to mortuary. So what if he had been denied a bed and dumped on the floor? Was it such a calamity? Even that seemed a luxury to the old woman. When she had set off with her young son in the back of the old truck for the hospital in

Cuttack, everyone in the village turned out to offer advice. She wouldn't be able to get a bed for her son, she was warned, unless she knew some doctor in the hospital. She ignored them and rode off, after she had pawned her few bronze utensils. Although they didn't get a bed, they did manage a place on the floor, large enough for him to lie down. And that without a single acquaintance, she felt as though she had successfully crossed the ocean in a flimsy dinghy, without an oar. Did her son need a bed anyway? Had he slept in one at home? Was not the smooth concrete of the hospital infinitely cleaner than the soggy mud floor of her hut? They had given him a plump cotton mattress to sleep on, instead of his filthy cotton quilt. At home, the sun and the moon peeped through the thatch, but here he had a solid roof overhead. Wasn't that enough? Why yearn for a bed in the temporary home of a hospital? Greed led to sin and sin to death....

As soon as the word entered her mind, her heart began a furious drumming against her ribs. What an inauspicious thought; she cursed herself. May she be consumed in the flames of her own foul mind; what evil there lay in a woman's tongue!

To drive the thought away, she turned to look at the people around her in the ward. Everywhere the sick and the maimed. Some with bandaged heads. Others with layer upon layer of dressings encrusting arms, legs, backs, bellies...peeling away, like insects moulting. Hollow eyes peeped out from scarecrow faces encased in bandages. How frightening! As if they were masquerading as ghosts to scare you. But no, this was no masquerade: the wounds beneath the bandages were real. In comparison, her son was unscarred. Not a scratch on him, not one scrap of bandage. Bare he had been, except for a loincloth, when he clambered up onto the babu's roof in the village to mend his thatch, in return for a day's wages... before he slipped and fell into the babu's stone-paved courtyard. And bare he lay now on the hospital floor. By the grace of the goddess Jagulei, not even his skin had been broken by the fall. He had merely fainted from fright. The village ayurvedic doctor had tried in vain to bring him back to his senses, and charms and spells had been equally ineffective. The lad had always been restless and fidgety, even as a child. And who could blame him: had not he lost an older as well as a younger brother? He must have been scared out of his wits, the rascal. Well, he would soon be up, once he got over the fright. The babu's daughter, who went to school in Cuttack, had made a blacktongued remark: after a fall like that, she said, people often remained unconscious for months; they could even be paralysed. It was she who suggested they go to the hospital in Cuttack, where he would be cured. The old woman was furious at first. Who had ever heard of a man remaining unconscious for months? Was he a human being or the

The ring

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Stava sdraiato sul pavimento dell'ospedale, indisturbato dal brusio delle persone in visita, dal via vai di infermieri e assistenti, dalla puzza di disinfettante e neppure dal ronzio delle mosche che sciamavano intorno al suo viso. Gli altri ricoverati del reparto, ai quali il sonno era negato da dolori, mali e malesseri di ogni genere, lo guardavano con invidia mentre passava il pomeriggio sonnecchiando beatamente.

Ogni angolo dell'ospedale era sovraffollato, dal reparto maternità alla camera mortuaria. Che importanza avrebbe avuto se gli fosse stato negato un letto e fosse stato cacciato per terra? Sarebbe davvero stata una disgrazia? All'anziana sembrava un lusso persino quell'ipotesi. Quando era partita con il suo giovane figlio nel retro del vecchio furgone per raggiungere l'ospedale di Cuttack, tutti gli abitanti del villaggio si rivelarono capaci di dare consigli. L'avvisarono che non sarebbe riuscita ad avere un letto per il figlio a meno che non conoscesse di persona qualche dottore. Li ignorò e partì, dopo aver impegnato alcuni utensili di bronzo. Anche se non avevano ottenuto un letto, erano riusciti ad avere un posto per terra, grande a sufficienza perché potesse coricarsi. E averlo ottenuto senza avere conoscenze, la fece sentire come se fosse riuscita ad attraversare l'oceano su una fragile scialuppa, senza neanche un remo. Del resto, davvero suo figlio avrebbe avuto bisogno di un letto? Aveva mai dormito in un letto a casa? Il levigato calcestruzzo dell'ospedale non era infinitamente più pulito del fradicio pavimento di fango della sua baracca? Gli avevano dato un soffice materasso di cotone per dormire, al posto della sua trapunta di cotone lercia. A casa, la luce del sole e della luna passavano attraverso il tetto di paglia, mentre qui aveva un tetto solido sopra la testa. Non era abbastanza? Perché desiderare un letto nell'alloggio temporaneo dell'ospedale? L'avidità porta al peccato, e il peccato alla morte...

Appena la parola entrò nei suoi pensieri, il suo cuore iniziò una rullata furiosa contro le sue costole. Che pensiero nefasto; si maledisse. Bruciasse nelle fiamme della sua stessa mente scellerata; quanto male può giacere nella lingua di una donna!

Per scacciare via il pensiero, si voltò a guardare le persone intorno a lei nel reparto. Malati e menomati ovunque. Alcuni con la testa fasciata. Altri con braccia, gambe, schiene, pance incrostate da strati su strati di bende...che si staccavano, come insetti che cambiano muta. Occhi incavati spuntavano da facce da spaventapasseri rivestite da bende. Che paura! Sembrava si fossero travestiti da fantasmi apposta per spaventare. Ma no, non era affatto una festa in maschera: le ferite sotto le fasciature erano vere. A confronto, suo figlio non aveva niente. Non un graffio, non un pezzo di benda. Era nudo, indossava solo un perizoma, quando, al villaggio, si era arrampicato sul tetto del babu per riparare la paglia, in cambio di una paga per la giornata... prima di scivolare e cadere sul pavimento di pietra del cortile del babu. E nudo giaceva adesso sul pavimento dell'ospedale. Per grazia della dea Jagulei, la caduta non gli aveva danneggiato nemmeno la pelle. Era a malapena svenuto dalla paura. Il dottore ayurvedico del villaggio aveva tentato invano di fargli riprendere i sensi, e amuleti e incantesimi erano stati entrambi inutili allo stesso modo. Il ragazzo era sempre stato irrequieto e agitato, anche da bambino. E chi poteva biasimarlo: non aveva perso sia il fratello maggiore, sia quello minore? Sarà stato terrorizzato a morte, quel birbantello. Beh, si sarebbe alzato presto, una volta ripreso dalla paura. La figlia del babu, che andava a scuola a Cuttack, aveva pronunciato un cattivo presagio: dopo una caduta del genere, disse, le persone spesso restano prive di sensi per mesi; potevano addirittura restare paralizzate. Era stata lei a suggerire di andare all'ospedale di Cuttack, dove l'avrebbero curato. La vecchia, inizialmente, si era imbestialita. Dove

demon Kumbhakarna? But who can retort to the powerful? Besides, once the remark, however silly, reached the woman's ears, she simply had to take her son to the hospital. A mother's heart after all, though she knew quite well it couldn't be anything serious. If he had bled or broken some bones, she might have worried. She had seen people being knocked unconscious from a blow on the head—not just seen it but suffered it as well. Her own husband.

The family home was being partitioned and a fence would be erected across the courtyard. The brothers were disputing a patch of the courtyard no wider than a handspan. Words led to blows and staves were raised. She jumped in to intervene. 'Stop!' she shouted to her husband. 'Your elder brother has already claimed the lion's share in everything else. Does it matter if he gets an extra handspan of the courtyard? Is it worth fighting over?'

The courtyard was crowded with menfolk and he could not afford to be seen listening to the counsel of a mere female. 'Go away, woman,' he roared, giving her a shove, making sure it was observed by everyone. 'Who asked you to meddle in the affairs of men? Do not forget your place.' And turning to his brother, he said, 'The fence will be raised where I draw the line, or else....'

The words were scarcely spoken when his brother's staff descended on his skull. Like water from an overturned pot, the blood streamed, bathing him from head to foot. He fell like an axed tree, never regaining consciousness. The corpse was carried out through the door, and the fence rose where he had drawn the line in his own blood. She remained, reluctantly, to bring up her fatherless boy, not knowing why or for whom she had survived but growing into a ripe old age, never once allowing herself to think of death but hoarding her happiness like a miser, through all her sorrows, until she saw the face of a grandson. Well, that's life; if one were to abandon it for the sake of another, would the world continue? The Almighty's design may be praised.

Since her son had not even bled, how could life ebb away as he lay unconscious? She bit her tongue again. How could she have such black thoughts when her son was sleeping beside her?

Her gaze turned from the bandaged patients in the ward to her son. How meek, how gentle he looked in his sleep: Not that he was any different awake. She stroked and caressed him from head to foot. His face looked exactly as it had in his childhood. Was it because they had shaved off his hair? It had been shorn once before, when he was seven, when his father had died. His tears had been more for his flowing locks than for his father. She had made a vow to offer his hair at the goddess' shrine when she could afford the ceremony, and so for seven years no blade touched his head and he romped free like the infant Krishna, dangling his shoulder-length curls festooned with crow and pigeon feathers. Holding to his lips the short whip his father used to drive the bullocks as if it was the infant God's flute, standing with one leg crossed across the other, and knees triple-bent in the tribhanga posture he had seen in the plays performed in the village. 'Look!' he lisped, 'I am Ma Yashoda's darling son.' The proud parents laughed at the child's theatrics. How charming those thick hanging curls looked against his chubby face. And how he had treasured them; poverty allowed him no other indulgence, so he pampered himself through his hair. He had not even a rag to cover his back, but would come and arrange his hair with infinite care before he set out to work. Passersby stopped to admire his crowning glory. Starvation robbed him of flesh and blood, dimmed the glow on his face, but not a hair of his head could it touch. And the doctors in the hospital had to shave it off! Why on earth? They had insisted it was necessary as they would have to take a picture of his head to find out if there was any injury inside. How odd. How could there be an injury inside the head when there was not even a scratch on the outside? God alone knows what the doctors

si era mai sentito di un uomo privo di sensi per mesi? Era un essere umano o il demone Kumbhakarna? Ma chi può rispondere a tono ai potenti? Per di più, una volta che l'osservazione, per quanto stupida, raggiunse il suo orecchio, la donna semplicemente sentì di dover portare suo figlio all'ospedale. Aveva il cuore di una madre dopotutto, nonostante sapesse bene che non poteva essere nulla di grave. Se avesse sanguinato o se si fosse rotto qualche osso, si sarebbe preoccupata. In passato aveva visto qualcuno reso inconscio da un colpo in testa – non solo l'aveva visto, ma aveva anche sofferto per questo. Quel qualcuno era suo marito.

Si stavano dividendo la casa di famiglia e avrebbero montato una recinzione da una parte all'altra del giardino. I due fratelli stavano discutendo per un appezzamento di giardino non più grande di un palmo di mano. Le parole portarono alle mani e si sollevarono i bastoni. “Basta!” urlò lei al marito. “Tuo fratello maggiore ha già rivendicato la fetta più grossa in tutto il resto. Che importa se si prende una spanna in più del giardino? Vale la pena litigare?”

Il giardino era pieno di uomini e non poteva farsi vedere mentre dava ascolto ai consigli di una donna. “Vai via, donna,” urlò, dandole uno spintone, assicurandosi che lo vedessero tutti. “Chi ti ha chiesto di impicciarti in cose da uomini? Non dimenticare il tuo posto.” E, voltandosi verso il fratello, disse “La recinzione verrà montata sulla linea che tratterò io, altrimenti...”

Le parole furono a malapena pronunciate quando il bastone di suo fratello scese sul suo capo. Il sangue scorse, come acqua da un vaso rovesciato, bagnandolo dalla testa ai piedi. Si sentì come un albero colpito da un'ascia, e non recuperò più coscienza. Il cadavere fu portato fuori dalla porta, e la recinzione fu montata sulla linea che aveva tracciato con il suo stesso sangue. Lei rimase, con riluttanza, a crescere suo figlio senza padre, senza sapere perché o per chi lei fosse sopravvissuta, ma a raggiungere una vecchiaia avanzata, e senza mai permettersi di pensare alla morte, conservando la sua felicità come un'avara, attraversando tutte le sue sofferenze, finché non vide il volto di un nipote. Beh, questa è la vita; se una persona dovesse abbandonarla per amore di un'altra, il mondo continuerebbe? Che il disegno dell'Onnipotente sia lodato.

Dal momento che suo figlio non aveva nemmeno sanguinato, come avrebbe potuto la vita scorrergli via mentre giaceva privo di sensi? Si morse nuovamente la lingua. Come poteva avere pensieri così neri mentre suo figlio dormiva accanto a lei?

Il suo sguardo lasciò i pazienti bendati del reparto per posarsi su suo figlio. Come sembrava docile e mite nel sonno: non che fosse molto diverso, da sveglio. Lo carezzò dalla testa ai piedi. Il suo volto non era cambiato per nulla da quando era bambino. Forse perché gli avevano rasato i capelli? Glieli avevano già rasati una volta, a sette anni, quando suo padre era mancato. Aveva versato più lacrime per i suoi riccioli fluenti che per il padre. Lei aveva fatto voto di offrire i capelli del bambino al tempio della dea se avesse potuto permettersi il rito, e così la sua testa aveva scampato la lametta per sette anni, e lui giocava libero come Krishna bambino, facendo ciondolare i suoi ricci lunghi fino alle spalle, adornato con una corona e con penne di piccione. Tenendo tra le labbra la piccola frusta che suo padre usava per guidare i buoi come se fosse stato il flauto del Dio bambino, reggendosi in piedi con una gamba incrociata sull'altra, e ginocchia piegate come nella posa di tribhanga che aveva visto negli spettacoli al villaggio. “Guardate!” sibilava, “Sono il figlio adorato di Ma Yashoda!” I genitori, orgogliosi, ridevano per lo spettacolino del figlio. Com'erano belli quei riccioli folti che pendevano sul suo visetto cicciottello. E come li amava; era l'unica soddisfazione che gli era concessa dalla povertà, perciò i suoi capelli costituivano la sua coccola. Non aveva nemmeno uno straccio per coprirsi la schiena, ma aveva l'abitudine di acconciarsi i capelli con un'attenzione infinita prima di andare a lavorare. I passanti si fermavano per ammirare la sua gloria incoronata. La fame lo privava di carne e sangue, spegneva la luce del suo volto, ma non poteva toccargli neanche un capello. E i dottori all'ospedale avevano dovuto rasarglieli! Perché mai?

saw in the picture, but all they did afterwards was lay him down flat on the floor. Not one drop of medicine did they give him, nor a drop of milk. No attempt to bring him back to consciousness. Doctors and nurses trooped past him to attend to the other patients, giving them medicines, injections, milk, fruit and biscuits, but no one so much as looked at him.

As if there was nothing the matter with him; as if he was lying there for the fun of it; as if he would get up and walk away when his sleep was done. Well, God grant that it be so. But how could he leave in his present state?

She pestered the doctors and nurses with her questions, but all the reply she received was, 'We have to wait, Aunt, until his consciousness returns. Trust us; we will give him all the care he needs. But at the right time.'

'I know,' the old woman said, 'but if he were to get some medicine or some milk, perhaps it would make him stronger so that he could regain consciousness sooner.'

'Be patient, Aunt,' they replied. 'Can a man swallow anything when he is unconscious? Would not it stick in his throat?'

She prayed to her gods, as she continued to stroke him. 'Please, god, make him conscious now so he can have something to eat. He must be starved.' All he had had since morning, when he went out to mend the babu's thatch, was some water in which they had soaked rice overnight. The rice itself was gone; her two grandchildren woke before the first crow cawed to gobble it all up. The gluttons. Her poor son had nothing. But why blame the children? That was the fate of the poor. Their pots were always empty, but never their bellies. Hunger filled them up. How strange God's ways were.

The stroking and caressing continued. Suddenly, she felt his fingers tightening, as though he was trying to clench his fist. Was consciousness returning? She massaged his palm and fingers, trying to straighten them out, to pass on the warmth of her own body into that cold hand. Her fingers came to rest on the middle finger of his left hand. For ages now, the old silver ring had gripped his finger tightly, as steadfast as an old friend that had sworn undying loyalty. Their hopes of getting a gold ring for his dowry were foredoomed, for providence had already chosen a poor widow's daughter to share his handful of rice. Where was her mother to find a gold ring?

The boy's mother understood her plight. Since she was happy with the daughter-in-law, she chose not to make a fuss over the ring. Before the wedding, she had her old pair of silver toerings melted down into a solid ring for her son, which he accepted without a murmur. Thus are the golden dreams of the poor turned into silver or brass, or even mud and gravel. Compromises have to be made or life would be impossible.

The flat ring of beaten silver burned on his dark skin like a ruby. No ring of gold could have shone as brightly on his grimy, sweaty, knotted finger as the silver did: at best it would have looked pale, like brass, or like a faded gourd flower.

When he cleansed his teeth each morning with ashes from the hearth, he scrubbed and polished the ring as well, but gently, lest the metal should wear away. But no amount of care could avert the inevitable: hard work was scraping the flesh off his bones and along with it, the silver from the ring on his working finger. It was wearing thin. When it was new, one could see some fine engraving on it, but not anymore. The upper surface had been scrubbed as flat and shiny as a tamarind seed.

Avevano insistito che fosse necessario perché avrebbero dovuto fotografargli la testa per scoprire se ci fossero stati danni interni. Che stranezza. Come potevano esserci danni interni se non aveva neanche un graffio? Solo Dio sa che cosa i dottori avessero visto nella fotografia, ma dopo non fecero altro che metterlo sdraiato per terra. Non gli diedero una goccia di medicina, né di latte. Non fecero alcun tentativo per fargli riprendere i sensi. Dottori e infermieri passavano oltre per prestare cure agli altri pazienti, facendo loro iniezioni, dando loro medicine, latte, frutta e biscotti, ma nessuno si disturbava a guardare lui.

Era come se non avesse nulla; come se stesse sdraiato lì per divertimento; come se avesse potuto alzarsi per andare via una volta smesso di dormire. Beh, Dio lo volesse. Ma come sarebbe stato possibile nella sua condizione attuale?

Lei assillò i dottori e gli infermieri con le sue domande, ma l'unica risposta che ebbe fu: “Dobbiamo aspettare, signora, che gli torni la coscienza. Si fidi di noi; gli daremo tutte le cure di cui ha bisogno. Ma al momento giusto.”

“Lo so,” disse l'anziana, “ma se gli deste qualche medicinale o un po' di latte, forse sarebbe più forte e riprenderebbe coscienza prima.”

“Porti pazienza, signora,” rispondevano. “Come può un uomo ingerire qualcosa se è privo di conoscenza? Non gli andrebbe di traverso?”

Lei pregò i suoi dei, mentre continuava ad accarezzarlo. “Dio, ti prego, fa che si svegli adesso affinché gli diano qualcosa da mangiare. Deve avere una fame terribile.” Dal mattino, quando era uscito per aggiustare il tetto del babu, aveva solo bevuto un po' d'acqua nella quale avevano messo in ammollo il riso per tutta la notte. Il riso era sparito; i nipoti si erano alzati prima del canto del gallo per trangugiarlo tutto. Quegli ingordi. Il suo povero figlio non aveva nulla. Ma perché incolpare i bambini? Era il destino dei poveri. Avevano i piatti sempre vuoti, ma le pance no. La fame le riempiva. Quant'erano strane le vie del Signore.

Le carezze continuarono. All'improvviso, lei sentì le dita di lui stringersi, come se stesse cercando di chiudere il pugno. Stava riprendendo i sensi? Gli massaggiò il palmo e le dita, cercando di rinforzarle, passando il calore del suo corpo a quella mano fredda. Era ormai tanto tempo che il vecchio anello d'argento gli stringeva forte le dita, deciso quanto un vecchio amico che aveva giurato eterna lealtà. Le loro speranze di prendergli un anello d'oro per la dote erano destinate a fallire, poiché la provvidenza aveva già scelto la povera figlia di una vedova con la quale spartirsi il suo pugno di riso. Dove poteva sua madre trovare un anello d'oro? La madre del ragazzo capì la situazione. Essendo contenta della nuora, decise di non alzare un polverone per un anello. Prima del matrimonio, aveva fatto fondere la sua vecchia coppia di anelli da piede per farci un anello massiccio per il figlio, il quale accettò senza discussioni. Così i sogni d'oro dei poveri vengono trasformati in argento o ottone, o persino in fango e ghiaia. Si dovevano fare compromessi, o la vita sarebbe stata impossibile.

L'anello d'argento battuto splendeva come un rubino sulla sua pelle scura. Nessun anello d'oro avrebbe potuto brillare così sul suo dito sporco, sudato e nodoso come faceva l'argento: al massimo sarebbe sembrato pallido, come l'ottone, o come un fiore di zucca sbiadito.

Quando si lavava i denti ogni mattina con ceneri prese da terra, strofinava e lucidava anche l'anello, ma con delicatezza, per timore di erodere il metallo. Ma neanche il massimo dell'attenzione avrebbe potuto scongiurare l'inevitabile: il duro lavoro stava raschiando via la carne dalle sue ossa e, con essa, l'argento dall'anello al suo dito da lavoratore. Si stava assottigliando. Quando era nuovo, si vedevano su di esso delle incisioni raffinate, ma ora non più. La superficie superiore era stata

Being pure silver, it was naturally soft, like her son. What a misfit he was in the present age; other labourers might shirk, but he would do the work of five. The more hardworking one was, the sooner one was worn out. Aged before one's time. Why did he have to climb into the babu's roof? Couldn't he have remained on the ground and flung the bales of straw into the thatch? There were other labourers working too; surely one of them could have mended the thatch. But bow your neck once and the whole world will rush to strike you down.

Someone as meek as her son was bound to attract trouble.

She went on caressing his face, his hands, fingers and the ring. The visitors were beginning to leave; it was already evening and it wouldn't be easy to find a bus back to the village. Kala Miyan, the truck driver who lived in her village, was leaving for Bargarh with cargo when the mishap occurred, and it was in his truck that she and her son travelled to Cuttack. He had left them at the hospital and driven away, telling her not to worry as he would inform a few of their fellow villagers, who were now working in Cuttack; they would come to the hospital and look after them. Medicine and food for patients were provided free at the hospital. The old woman would have no need for money, other than the bus fare back to the village for her son and herself.

She would have liked to buy a few of the sweets wrapped in shiny paper, for the grandchildren, as well as a whistle for her grandson. But where was the money? She had a two-rupee note folded and tied up in a knot in the tail-end of her sari, but that was all. The children would sulk if she took nothing for them. They had insisted on accompanying her to Cuttack; they even ran for a distance behind the truck shouting, 'We want a ride.' Her nine-year-old grandson was a regular imp, while the granddaughter, two years younger, was as quiet as a lamb. Her brother had outstripped her as they ran behind the truck, and as she tried to catch up, she tripped and fell on her face. The blood streamed from her split lip and the scream of pain was so longdrawn, the old woman thought she wouldn't breathe again. And the stupid daughter-in-law of hers had stood there like a log looking at the departing truck with wide eyes, instead of picking the child up and soothing her. 'I'll get some sweets and toys for you,' the old woman shouted as the truck went round a bend in the road. She couldn't see their faces anymore. Poor dears; how would they manage without her? There wasn't a grain of rice in the house. How long could she beg and borrow? They would be waiting anxiously for her to return.

Her own stomach was churning with hunger. A few morsels were all she normally ate, but since the night before, it had been a total fast. Her son would have bought some rice for them with the wages he would have been paid when... well, that was all over now.

The hospital provided meals for patients, but not for the relatives or friends who tended to them.

As for her son, he was sleeping so soundly, there wasn't even a rustle. That afternoon, they had served rice, dal and curry to the patients. The hospital had skilled cooks; though she hadn't tasted the food, she could tell from the aroma. She had tried to shake him awake; if he had been fed, she could have had something to eat as well. She wanted to tell the attendants, 'Is he going to lose his share just because he is asleep? If he can't eat now there's always his mother.' But she was too shy to say anything. What if they refused? She had never begged, even during the worst times. Would she bring disgrace upon herself, now that she had come to the city?

Everyone in her village would come to know about it.

strofinata fino a renderla piatta e lucida quanto un seme di tamarindo. Essendo argento puro, per natura era tenue, come suo figlio. Quant'era diverso dagli altri adesso; gli altri lavoratori si sarebbero dileguati, ma lui avrebbe svolto il lavoro per cinque. Più una persona si impegna sul lavoro, prima si logora. Invecchia prima del tempo. Perché aveva dovuto arrampicarsi sul tetto del babu? Non avrebbe potuto restare a terra e lanciare le balle di fieno sul tetto? C'erano anche altri lavoratori; sicuramente anche uno di loro avrebbe potuto fare la riparazione. Ma piega il collo una sola volta e il mondo intero non aspetterà altro per abbatterti. Una persona mite come come suo figlio era destinato ad attrarre problemi.

Continuò ad accarezzargli il viso, le mani, le dita e l'anello. I visitatori stavano iniziando ad andarsene; era già sera e non sarebbe stato semplice trovare una corriera per tornare al villaggio. Kala Miyan, il camionista che viveva nel villaggio, stava partendo per Bargah con la merce quando capitò l'inconveniente, e fu sul suo camion che lei e il figlio viaggiarono verso Cuttack. Li aveva lasciati all'ospedale e se n'era andato, dicendole di non preoccuparsi e che avrebbe avvisato alcuni abitanti del villaggio, che ora lavoravano a Cuttack, così sarebbero venuti all'ospedale per aiutarli. Medicinali e cibo erano gratuiti per i pazienti dell'ospedale. L'anziana non avrebbe avuto bisogno di denaro, se non per il biglietto della corriera per sé stessa e per il figlio per tornare al villaggio.

Avrebbe voluto comprare alcuni dolcetti fasciati in quella carta luccicante, per i nipotini, e anche un fischiello per il nipote. Ma dov'era il denaro? Aveva una banconota da due rupie piegata e legata con un nodo al cinturino del suo sari, e nient'altro. I bambini avrebbero messo su il broncio se non avesse preso nulla per loro. Avevano insistito per accompagnarla a Cuttack; erano anche corsi dietro al camion per un po', urlando "Vogliamo un passaggio." Il nipote di nove anni si comportava costantemente da peste, mentre la nipotina, di due anni più piccola, era tenera come un agnellino. Il fratello l'aveva superata mentre correvano dietro al camion, e lei, cercando di raggiungerlo, era inciampata ed era caduta di faccia. Le uscì il sangue dal labbro spaccato e le urla di dolore furono così lunghe che la donna pensò che non avrebbe più respirato. E la sua stupida nuora era rimasta lì impalata a guardare con gli occhi sbarrati il camion che partiva, anziché prendere la bambina in braccio e consolarla. "Ti prenderò dolci e giocattoli," urlò la vecchia mentre il camion girava la curva. Non vedeva più i loro volti. Poveri tesori; come avrebbero potuto cavarsela senza di lei? Non c'era un chicco di riso in casa. Quanto ancora la nuora avrebbe potuto fare l'elemosina e chiedere prestiti? Avrebbero atteso con ansia che tornasse.

Lo stomaco le stava ribollendo dalla fame. Normalmente non mangiava altro che qualche boccone, ma era stata a completo digiuno dalla sera prima. Suo figlio avrebbe comprato per loro del riso con il compenso che avrebbe ricevuto quando...beh, ora era tutto finito.

L'ospedale distribuiva pasti ai pazienti, ma non ai parenti e agli amici che si occupavano di loro. Per quanto riguardava suo figlio, lui stava dormendo così profondamente che non volava neanche una mosca. Quel pomeriggio ìavevano servito riso, dal e curry ai pazienti. L'ospedale aveva ottimi cuochi; anche se non aveva potuto assaggiare il cibo, l'aveva capito dal profumo. Lei aveva provato a scrollarlo per svegliarlo. Se gli avessero servito il pranzo, avrebbe potuto mangiare qualcosa anche lei. Avrebbe voluto dire agli operatori: "Perderà la sua parte solo perché sta dormendo? Se adesso non può mangiare lui, c'è sempre sua madre." Ma era troppo timida per dire qualsiasi cosa. Che cosa avrebbe fatto se avessero rifiutato? Non aveva mai chiesto l'elemosina, neppure nei momenti peggiori. Poteva attirare la disgrazia su di sé, ora che era venuta in città? Tutti nel villaggio sarebbero venuti a saperlo.

Ma dov'erano le persone del villaggio che Kalu Miyan doveva aver informato?

Aveva così tanta fretta di andarsene.

But where were the people from her village that Kalu Miyan was supposed to have informed?

He had been in such a hurry to leave.

How would she manage without help?

She felt a slight tremor in his hand. The breathing quickened. Was consciousness returning?

The nurse doing her rounds stopped to look. She quickly ran to fetch a syringe and gave him an injection. Two men in white aprons rushed to his side and pressed down heavily on his ribs. Good god. Even a healthy person would collapse under such rough handling. Was this how they treated patients at the hospital? And was it for this she had brought him here?

‘You’ll smash his ribs,’ she shouted angrily. ‘Do you want to cripple him? Who’ll look after his family? Can’t you be more gentle?’

They left him and walked away. Had she annoyed them? But how could she have remained quiet after what they had done to her son?

He wasn’t stirring now. The nurse covered him from head to toe with a clean white sheet. The patients in adjoining beds craned their necks and peeped curiously like tortoises. All eyes were on that white sheet. But why? Couldn’t he have a clean sheet, though he was poor? It was the government that provided it, not they; why should they whisper and mutter? Her son wasn’t going to walk away with that sheet; he would surely return it when he left. He wasn’t the sort who took what didn’t belong to him.

That nurse seemed always to be in a great hurry, rushing madly around the ward. In her haste, she had even covered up the boy’s face with the sheet. Wouldn’t he suffocate? Even in the coldest winter, he liked to sleep with his face uncovered. ‘I’ll choke to death in my sleep if my face is covered,’ he would say. ‘When I depart, it’ll be in broad daylight, and not like a thief in the night,’ he had always joked. As if it was a joking matter. She quickly uncovered his face, folding the sheet back. He felt cold to her touch. The fever must be coming down. Thank God.

The nurse came back looking anxious, as though a debtor was about to run away with her money. ‘Aunt,’ she said to the old woman, ‘do you have any relatives in town? Send word to them.’

‘I have no one here,’ the old woman replied, not comprehending. ‘All strangers. What do you want me to tell them?’

‘You have no relatives in Cuttack then?’ the nurse repeated. ‘And in the village?’

‘No one who can help,’ the old woman said. ‘The daughter-in-law is a simpleton; her children are babies. This son is the only support I have.’ She stroked him fondly. Poor lad, she thought, has he had one decent meal since his father died, or a day’s rest? Carrying the entire family burden on his shoulders.

‘Do you have any money?’ the nurse asked again.

Come poteva cavarsela senza aiuto?

Sentì un lieve tremore alla mano del figlio. Il respiro divenne più rapido. Stava forse riprendendo i sensi?

L'infermiera che stava facendo il giro si fermò a guardare. Corse velocemente a preparare una siringa e gli fece un'iniezione. Due uomini con il grembiule bianco corsero al suo fianco e gli premettero forte sul costato. Santo cielo. Persino una persona in salute sarebbe collassata sotto un trattamento così pesante. Era questo il modo in cui trattavano i pazienti all'ospedale? Ed era per questo che aveva portato lì suo figlio?

“Gli romperete le costole,” urlò piena di rabbia. “Volete paralizzarlo? Chi si occuperà della sua famiglia? Non potete essere più delicati?”

Lo lasciarono ed andarono via. Li aveva fatti arrabbiare? Ma come poteva restare in silenzio dopo quello che avevano fatto a suo figlio?

Ora non si muoveva. L'infermiera lo coprì dalla testa ai piedi con un lenzuolo bianco pulito. I pazienti nei letti accanto allungarono il collo per sbirciare, curiosi, come delle tartarughe. Tutti gli occhi erano addosso a quel lenzuolo bianco. Ma perché? Non poteva avere un lenzuolo pulito, pur essendo povero? Era il governo a fornirglielo, non loro; perché mai dovevano bisbigliare e parlottare? Suo figlio non avrebbe portato via quel lenzuolo; l'avrebbe di certo restituito al momento di andarsene. Non era il tipo di persona che prende ciò che non è suo.

Quell'infermiera sembrava essere sempre di gran fretta, correndo follemente intorno al reparto.

Nella sua premura, aveva anche coperto il volto del ragazzo con il lenzuolo. Non sarebbe soffocato? Anche nell'inverno più freddo amava dormire con il volto scoperto. “Soffocherò nel sonno con la faccia coperta”, diceva. “Quando morirò, sarà alla luce del giorno, e non come un ladro nella notte,” scherzava sempre. Come se fosse qualcosa su cui scherzare. Gli scoprì velocemente il viso, ripiegando il lenzuolo. Sentì che era freddo. La febbre probabilmente sta scendendo. Grazie a Dio.

L'infermiera tornò indietro con l'aspetto ansioso, come se un debitore se ne stesse andando con i suoi soldi. “Signora”, disse alla vecchia, “ha parenti in città? Li avvisi.”

“Non ho nessuno qui,” rispose la donna, non capendo. “Tutti estranei. Che cosa vuole che dica loro?”

“Quindi non ha parenti a Cuttack?” ripeté l'infermiera. “E al villaggio?”

“Nessuno può aiutare,” disse la vecchia. “Mia nuora è una sempliciotta; i suoi figli sono bambini. Questo mio figlio è l'unico supporto che ho.” Lo accarezzò affettuosamente. Povero ragazzo, pensò, ha mai avuto un pasto come si deve, dalla morte di suo padre, o un giorno di riposo? Portava il peso della famiglia intera sulle sue spalle.

“Ha denaro?” chiese nuovamente l'infermiera.

“Certo,” rispose la donna. “Potevo venire a Cuttack a mani vuote?” Ecco qui una banconota da due rupie. La può prendere se le serve denaro; cibo e medicinali sono gratuiti qui.

“No, no, li tenga,” disse l'infermiera frettolosamente, “Non ne ho bisogno. È a lei che stavo pensando.”

‘Of course,’ the old woman replied. ‘Could I have come to Cuttack empty-handed? There, that’s a two-rupee note. You can have it if you need some money; the medicine and food are free here.’

‘No, no, you keep it,’ the nurse said hurriedly, ‘I don’t need it. It’s you I was thinking of.’

‘Me?’

‘Yes. There’s no point in taking him back to the village now.’ She saw the confusion on the old woman’s face, hesitated, and went on firmly, ‘If you have neither money nor help, how will you manage here?’

‘Well, if I could bring my son to Cuttack without help, I should have no trouble taking him back,’ the old woman said emphatically. ‘Once he’s awake, we’ll go back. What do I need relatives for? Has anyone ever come to help?’

‘Your son is no more, Aunt,’ the nurse said in a strong voice. ‘There’s no use taking him back. You have no money. The funeral can be done here; the hospital staff will remove the body.’

She couldn’t understand at first and only stared. Then the great rasping sobs came. She lay down flat, covering up his body with hers. Pulling the sheet away, she caressed the still, unconscious body with both hands from head to foot, from foot to head. She covered the pale face with her kisses, until the cheeks glowed red with blood. Pressing her face down on his, beating her forehead against his shaven skull, she howled out a lifetime of grief, reliving the past, flooding him with tears and memories of the games he had played in the dust as a child, the games that a cruel divinity had played on him, of laughter, tears and hunger. Her fingers tore at the earth, ripped it apart. Then she beat the earth with her head. Scooping up a handful of dust, she smeared it on her son’s face and body, howling madly, complaining, ‘Listen, you three hundred million gods, wherever you may be. Bring my son back to life. I don’t ask for wealth, for palaces to live in. Only for a little air. Let him breathe again.’

Her grief touched everyone in the ward. Eyes grew moist as they looked at her.

Her sobs subsided as she became exhausted. The sound of her sobbing changed. Grief turned to anger: She cursed her treacherous husband, the murderous brother-in-law... her son, whose treachery was greater even than his father’s. She cursed the cruel gods who held in their hands the keys to life and death. The people of her village, the other labourers who had been repairing the babu’s thatch, the babu himself, Kala Miyan the truck driver, the doctors and nurses, the hospital attendants. Those wretched patients in the ward who were witnesses to her grief. Pain wrenched her ribs, her bowels, her flesh and skin, milked her entire being dry. The curses flowed in broken strings:

‘May you find no peace in the three worlds, O father of my willful son. If you had to abandon me in my youth, why did you come in procession to my door with music and lights? Who asked you to parade your manhood, you eater of my happiness? Wasn’t it enough that you stripped the bangles from my wrists? Didn’t that satisfy you? You had to leave your seed in my womb, you cheat. And that son of yours, fourteen times worse than the father. What did you gain from cutting my throat, you rascal? Was it for this day that I nurtured you in my womb? And what did you profit from devouring my son, daughter-in-law, you wretched widow’s offspring? Is your thirst quenched now,

“A me?”

“Sì. Ora non c'è più motivo di portarlo al villaggio.” Vide la confusione sul volto dell'anziana, esitò un attimo e poi continuò con fermezza, “Se non ha denaro né aiuto, come se la caverà qui?”

“Beh, se sono riuscita a portare mio figlio a Cuttack da sola, non dovrei avere problemi a riportarlo indietro,” disse l'anziana con enfasi. “Una volta che si sveglierà, torneremo a casa. A che cosa mi servono i parenti? È per caso venuto qualcuno ad aiutarmi?”

“Suo figlio non c'è più, Signora,” disse l'infermiere con voce forte. “Non ha senso portarlo indietro. Lei non ha denaro. Si può fare qui il funerale; sarà il personale dell'ospedale a portare via il corpo.”

All'inizio non capì e semplicemente restò con lo sguardo fisso. Poi arrivarono i singhiozzi striduli. Si sdraiò a terra, coprendo il corpo del figlio con il suo. Tirando via il lenzuolo, accarezzò il corpo fermo e inconscio con entrambe le mani dalla testa ai piedi, dai piedi alla testa. Gli coprì il volto pallido di baci, finché il sangue del ragazzo non gli colorò le guance di rosso. Premendo il volto sul suo, battendo la fronte contro il suo cranio rasato, buttò fuori nelle sue urla il dolore di una vita, rivivendo il passato, inondandolo di lacrime e ricordi dei giochi che faceva nella polvere da bambino, i giochi che una divinità crudele aveva fatto su di lui, di risate, lacrime e fame. Le sue dita lacerarono il terreno, dilaniandolo. Poi batté la testa contro il pavimento. Sollevò un pugno di polvere, lo sparse sul volto e sul corpo del figlio, urlando come una pazza, lamentandosi, “Ascoltate, oh trecento milioni di dei, ovunque voi siate. Riportate mio figlio in vita. Non vi chiedo ricchezza, non vi chiedo palazzi in cui vivere. Vi chiedo solo un po' d'aria. Fatelo respirare di nuovo.”

Il suo dolore toccò tutti i presenti nel reparto. Mentre la guardavano, i loro occhi si inumidivano.

I suoi singhiozzi diminuirono perché era esausta. Il suono cambiò. Il dolore divenne rabbia: maledisse il suo marito infedele, quell'assassino di suo cognato...suo figlio, la cui infedeltà era stata persino più grande di quella del padre. Maledisse gli dei malvagi, i quali avevano dato loro in mano le chiavi della vita e della morte. Gli abitanti del villaggio, gli altri lavoratori che stavano riparando il tetto del babu, il babu stesso, Kala Miyan il camionista, i dottori e gli infermieri, gli inservienti dell'ospedale. Quei pazienti disgraziati nel reparto che erano divenuti testimoni della sua pena. Il dolore le straziava le costole, l'intestino, la carne e la pelle, prosciugava la sua intera essenza. Le maledizioni vibravano come corde spezzate:

“Che tu non trovi pace nei tre mondi, O padre del mio ostinato figlio. Se hai dovuto abbandonarmi nella mia gioventù, perché sei venuto in processione alla mia porta con musiche e luci? Chi ti ha chiesto di sfilare con la tua virilità, tu, consumatore della mia felicità? Non ti è bastato strapparmi i bracciali dai polsi? Non ti ha soddisfatto? Dovevi lasciare il tuo seme nel mio grembo, traditore. E quel tuo figlio, quattordici volte peggio del padre. Cos'hai guadagnato a tagliarmi la gola, mascalzone? L'hai fatto per quel giorno in cui ti ho nutrito nel mio grembo? E che cos'hai guadagnato divorando mio figlio, nuora, progenie disgraziata di una vedova? È soddisfatta la tua sete ora, divoratrice di mariti? E quel demone del fratello maggiore di mio marito: sei felice adesso? Possano gli dei colpirti con i loro fulmini...”

Il suono e il linguaggio della sua pena cambiavano costantemente, ora docile, ora duro o osceno. Gli spettatori guardavano in silenzio. Il dolore aveva così tanti volti?

La rabbia si trasformò nella tenerezza di una madre, poi in orgoglio ferito. “Vai, vai dove preferisci, dove puoi trovare felicità,” disse indignata al figlio. “Lascia che tua madre soffra. Lasciala ad affrontare il mondo da sola. In che modo possono interessarti i suoi problemi? Non vedi quanto è forte? Come ha potuto la tua coscienza permetterti di abbandonarla, con il peso di tre anime deboli

husband-eater? And that demon my husband's elder brother: are you happy now? May the gods strike you with their thunderbolts....'

The sounds and language of her grief changed constantly, tender at one moment, harsh or obscene the next. The onlookers watched in silence. Did grief have so many faces?

Anger turned into a mother's tenderness, into hurt pride. 'Go, go where you please, wherever you can find happiness,' she said indignantly to her son. 'Let your mother suffer. Let her face the world alone. How does her plight affect you? Can't you see for yourself how strong she is? How did your conscience allow you to abandon her, with the burden of three helpless souls on her shoulders? What tricksters you proved to be, father and son. Shirkers both. You were too cowardly to face the world, so you left a feeble woman to carry your burden. Why did you build a nest? Well, go, go. If you had no time to think of me, why should I be bothered with you? Does one have any claim on another in this world? It's all deceit, all illusion. Nothing but lies.'

She consoled herself into silence. Turning away from her son, she fixed her vacant gaze on the darkness outside, as though she had not a care in the world, or was too exhausted to care. Thus she sat for hours, immersed in her own thoughts. When she seemed to have recovered her composure a little, a nurse and two attendants approached her. 'Aunt,' the nurse said, 'We will have to carry the dead body away. The doctors won't allow a dead body to lie here all night among the living patients. Your son's funeral rites will be performed well, Aunt. Don't be worried.'

She looked up, startled. In a pitiful voice, she said, 'All I have is this two-rupee note. Will it be enough?' She burst into tears.

'There's no need for money, Aunt,' the nurse said. 'It'll all be free.'

'Don't delay now,' the nurse said to the attendants. 'Arrange to remove the dead body.' She left.

The two attendants bent low to whisper to her, 'How can it be entirely free, Aunt? Give us whatever money you have.'

Eagerly, she untied the knot in her sari and gave them the two-rupee note. There was not a trace of miserliness in her. He had never been anyone's debtor while he lived; would she allow him to be a debtor in death? Why should strangers remove his body free of charge?

She caressed him one last time, pouring every drop of love into that last kiss. 'Go, my son,' she said, bidding him farewell, 'You never knew what happiness is. Perhaps you'll have some happiness now.'

The attendants reached out to lift the corpse. Bending, they said, 'Aunt, let him go now. It is getting late. Why such fondness for a mere lump of clay?'

Slowly, gently, she brushed her hand across his face and body, gripping his rigid, halfclenched fist in her quivering fingers, allowing the last tender drops of love to drain away.

Then she got up and shook herself free.

sulle sue spalle? Quanto vi siete dimostrati imbroglioni, padre e figlio. Due lavativi. Eravate troppo codardi per affrontare il mondo, così avete lasciato una debole donna a sopportare il vostro fardello. Perché avete costruito un nido? Bene, andate, andate. Se non avete avuto tempo di pensare a me, perché dovrei preoccuparmi di voi? Si possono avere pretese sugli altri in questo mondo? È tutto un inganno, un'illusione. Nient'altro che bugie.”

Si consolò in silenzio. Allontanandosi dal figlio, fissò il suo sguardo vagante sul buio fuori, come se non avesse interesse nel mondo, o come se fosse troppo stanca per averne. Così sedette per ore, immersa nei suoi stessi pensieri. Quando sembrava che si fosse ricomposta un po', un'infermiera e due inservienti si avvicinarono a lei. “Signora,” disse l'infermiera, “Dovremo portare via il corpo. I dottori non permetteranno che un cadavere resti lì tutta la notte insieme a pazienti vivi. I riti funerari per suo figlio saranno fatti come si deve, signora. Non si preoccupi.”

Alzò lo sguardo, spaventata. Con una voce pietosa, disse, “Una banconota da due rupie è tutto quello che ho. Basterà?” Scoppiò in lacrime.

“Non serve denaro, signora,” disse l'infermiera. “Sarà tutto gratuito.”

“Sbrighiamoci,” disse l'infermiera agli inservienti. “Organizziamoci per portare via il cadavere.” Se ne andò.

I due inservienti si chinarono per sussurrarle all'orecchio, “Come può essere tutto gratuito, signora? Ci dia tutto il denaro che ha.”

Ansiosamente, sciolse il nodo del suo sari e diede loro la banconota da due rupie. Non c'era neanche una traccia d'avarizia in lei. Il figlio non era mai stato in debito per tutta la sua vita; avrebbe potuto lasciare che lo fosse da morto? Perché degli sconosciuti avrebbero dovuto portare via il suo corpo gratuitamente?

Lo accarezzò un'ultima volta, versando ogni singola goccia d'amore in quell'ultimo bacio. “Vai, figlio mio,” disse, salutandolo, “Non hai mai conosciuto la felicità. Forse ne avrai un po' adesso.”

Gli inservienti tesero le braccia per tirare su il corpo. Piegandosi, dissero, “Signora, lo lasci andare ora. Sta diventando tardi. Perché tutto questo affetto per un grumo di argilla?”

Lentamente, delicatamente, passò la mano sul suo volto e sul suo corpo, stringendo il pugno rigido e semichiuso tra le sue dita tremanti, lasciando scorrere via le ultime tenere gocce d'amore. Poi si alzò e si liberò.

Gli inservienti lo tirarono su da terra; uno lo afferrò per le braccia, l'altro per i piedi. Le dita dell'anziana erano ancora legate alle sue, come bloccate tra di esse. Sentì l'anello, così caro al figlio. Tutt'a un tratto, come se fosse improvvisamente tornata in sé, strinse l'anello e lo strattonò con tutta la forza che aveva. Gli inservienti avevano bramosamente messo occhio sull'anello. “Quanto sei avida, vecchia strega,” dissero. “Rapinare il tuo figlio defunto!” Ma li ignorò. Finalmente, l'anello venne via.

Gli spettatori, che erano rimasti storditi dalla sua pena, erano scioccati. La pietà divenne ribrezzo. “Che cattiveria!” dissero. “È una madre o un blocco di pietra?”

Gli inservienti portarono via il cadavere.

The attendants lifted him off the ground; one gripped his arms, the other his feet. The old woman's fingers were still interlaced with his, as though locked into them. She could feel the ring, so dear to her son. Suddenly, as though she had abruptly come to her senses, she clutched the ring and tugged at it with all her strength. The attendants had been eyeing the ring hungrily. 'How greedy you are, old hag,' they said. 'Robbing your dead son!' But she ignored them. Finally, the ring came free.

The onlookers, who had been numbed by her grief, were shocked. Sympathy turned into loathing.

'How mean!' they said. 'Is she a mother or a block of stone?' The attendants carried the corpse away.

'Where are you taking my darling son, you wretches?' She howled as she followed the attendants through the door, out into street, for a short distance. 'May Death take you.' The mother's grief stunned sky and earth, tree and leaf, into silence. The darkness swallowed up her son. Only the ring glistened in her fingers.

With infinite care, she secreted the ring within seven folds of her sari's tail-end and tied it up in a knot, her eyes focused on the path along which they had taken her son.

How dark it was.

“Dove state portando, il mio amato figlio, disgraziati?” Urlò seguendoli oltre la porta, per strada, per una breve distanza. “Che la morte vi prenda.” Il dolore della madre sbalordì il cielo e la terra, gli alberi e le foglie, nel silenzio. Il buio ingoiò suo figlio. Solo l’anello luccicava tra le sue dita.

Con attenzione infinita, nascose l’anello in sette piegature della cintura del suo sari e lo legò in un nodo, con gli occhi concentrati sul sentiero lungo il quale avevano portato suo figlio.

Quanto era buio.

The Man of The Century

Premalata Devi

Tr. Snehaprava Das

They look upon me as a rebel. There is a long list of criminal charges against my name. I am regarded as a misfit in their civilised world. The government probably has announced a prize for disciplining me. I am different, they say—maybe an anti-social, barbaric and a dangerous combination of some such deploring adjectives. These adjectives, I feel, linked to my name, seem to enhance my personality. The mere mention of my name sends a shiver down the spines of the so-called civilised individuals.

Am I so frightening?

I don't agree.

I know that I am not a superman. I am just another ordinary human being born into a modern, snobbish era. Maybe I am not as well-disposed as others who live in this age. Maybe my looks arouse revulsion and my thoughts are diabolic. This life for me is just a bizarre blend of some discordant moments.

I don't remember since when I have begun to take note of the world around me. I cannot put my finger on the exact date of my birth in a calendar. The man who has stamped his name on me to give me my identity was not a conspicuous character in any way. It was enough for me that I was a human child. My natal hearth was set somewhere in some dirty, squalid shack in some nameless land unnoticed, unidentifiable on the world map. I don't know if I should pity or thank the woman who carried an ill-shaped, rickety creature like me in her womb for months and lived on the satisfaction her motherhood paid her. More than often my heart had hankered after the soothing touch of her bony, turmeric-tinted hands. Later, when I realised that one had to strive hard to survive in this cruel world I tried to bury the nostalgia deep within me. I admit that the planet I live on is a moving mass. Civilisations, therefore, change. Still I wonder if human civilisation is heading towards progress or decadence. Probably the latter, I thought. An enormous ebullition of frustration enveloped my very being as the truth dawned upon me.

It must have been an ominous hour at which I slid out of my mother's womb to land on a little patch of damp earth and began to whimper, beating my tiny hands and feet as the light of the morning sun hit my eyes. A mysterious, indistinct voice whispered in my ears, 'You are the Terminator. Look at the vast desert of black loss stretched ahead of you. This is where you are fated to live—where poverty, pain, hunger and deceit reign. Your inception has pronounced the Doomsday.'

The tableaux of terrible memories trudged past me, each one a witness to the truth of the oracle pronounced at the time when I made my fateful entry onto this planet.

One of the bitterest of them was the silent suffering of my innocent father, who had an element of honesty like King Yudhisthir in him, and which destroyed him. He proved himself a misfit in a society that thrived on crime and corruption when he refused to pass a false bill. Fake charges were

L'uomo del secolo

Premalata Devi

Tr. Snehaprava Das

Mi consideravano un ribelle. C'è una lunga lista di accuse contro di me. Mi vedono come un disadattato nel loro civilissimo mondo. Il governo avrà probabilmente annunciato una ricompensa a chi ha imposto una taglia sulla mia testa. Io sono diverso, dicono; forse antisociale, barbaro, una combinazione pericolosa di alcuni di questi spregevoli aggettivi. Sento che questi, legati al mio nome, abbiano l'effetto di potenziare la mia personalità. Il solo menzionarmi fa correre un brivido lungo le schiene dei cosiddetti individui civilizzati.

Sono così spaventoso?

Non sono d'accordo.

So di non essere un superuomo. Sono solo uno tra i tanti ordinari esseri umani nati in un'era moderna e con la puzza sotto il naso. Forse non sono ben disposto come altri che vivono in quest'epoca. Forse il mio aspetto è repellente, i miei pensieri diabolici. Per me questa vita è solo una bizzarra miscela di qualche dissonante momento.

Non ricordo quando ho iniziato a notare il mondo intorno a me. Non saprei puntare il dito sulla data esatta della mia nascita sul calendario. L'uomo che ha timbrato il suo nome su di me per darmi la mia identità non era un personaggio di rilievo in nessun modo. Per me era sufficiente il fatto che fossi un bambino umano. Il mio cuore era nato da qualche parte, in una sporca e squallida baracca in una terra senza nome, inosservata, non identificabile sul planisfero. Non so se io debba compatire o ringraziare la donna che ha portato in grembo, per mesi, una creatura rachitica e malformata come me e che ha vissuto la soddisfazione che la maternità le ha dato. Molto spesso il mio cuore aveva bramato di ricevere il tocco rassicurante delle sue mani ossute color curcuma. Più avanti, quando realizzai che bisogna combattere per sopravvivere in questo mondo crudele, provai a seppellire la nostalgia dentro di me nel profondo. Ammetto che il pianeta in cui vivo è una massa in movimento. Di conseguenza, le civiltà cambiano. Mi chiedo se la civiltà umana si stia dirigendo verso il progresso o verso la decadenza. Probabilmente la seconda, pensai. Un enorme sfogo di frustrazione avvolse la mia intera esistenza quando la verità tramontò su di me.

Dev'essere stata un'ora nefasta quella in cui sono scivolato fuori dal grembo di mia madre per giungere in un piccolo appezzamento di terra umida e ho iniziato a piagnucolare, battendo le manine e i piedini mentre la luce del mattino colpiva i miei occhi. Una voce misteriosa e indistinta mi sussurrò all'orecchio: "Tu sei il Distruttore. Guarda l'immenso deserto di rovine nere distese davanti a te. È qui che sei destinato a vivere, dove regnano la povertà, il dolore, la fame e la falsità. La tua creazione, ha dichiarato il Giorno del Giudizio."

Si trascinò addosso a me il quadro dei terribili ricordi, ciascun testimone della verità che l'oracolo aveva pronunciato quando avevo compiuto il mio disastroso ingresso su questo pianeta.

Uno dei più amari era la sofferenza silenziosa di mio padre, un innocente che portava dentro di sé il seme dell'onestà, come il Re Yudhisthira, elemento che lo distrusse. Si era dimostrato un disadattato in una società che prosperava grazie al crimine e alla corruzione quando si rifiutò di

framed against him and he was dismissed from his job. His efficiency, honesty and sincerity could not save him. He inflicted the punishment of self-exile on himself and moved to another place with his family. His daughter, the eldest of his children, decided to shoulder the responsibility of the family, managed to get a low-paying job with whatever little education she had had. But things turned even worse. She, like most girls in similar plight, was constantly hounded by the lewd eyes of a bunch of amoral young men and finally one day as she was returning from her work-place they forced her into a car and took her to some unknown place. My father lodged a First Information Report against them at the police station and a case was filed. But the sons of big-shots are always beyond the reach of law. They, however, had sent her back unhurt sometime after. I don't know if they were moved by pity or fear. But the ordeal was too much for my sister to bear. She strangled herself to death. Her body hung from the hook in the bedroom. My father sat on the veranda dry-eyed, his mouth agape. As he sat there, hand on his head, his vacant gaze fixed at nothing in particular up in the sky, a nicely decorated jeep fitted with a loudspeaker, that shouted strong feminist slogans, went past the street at the back of our house.

Some hazy images of social progress lined up in the memory track began to move on one after another and a muffled cry of despair escaped my throat despite my hardest efforts to thrust it back. I could see a college-teacher manhandled by goons under the garb of social workers for the offence of catching red-handed an examinee engaged in cheating. There was another—some hooligans snatching his only means of survival, his pension amount, from an old man walking down a crowded road. The man screamed, but no one came to his rescue; the motor-bike sped away from the spot and mingled amidst the stream of vehicles racing down the road.

The incompetence of my father to cope with the corrupt system, the agony of my helpless mother who could do nothing except curse her fate, the picture of the lifeless, pathetic looking body of my sister, were too tough tests for me to get through. With a determination to seek the help of those who held the sceptre of justice, I approached the men at the helm of affairs. No one had any compassion for me; the ones I sought help from lurched out of the bar in broad daylight. Their glazing eyes could not notice a pitiable creature like me. Nor did my appeal and grievance reach their callous ears. Instead I was jeered at, kicked to the roadside like a stray dog. When I saw the men in power derogate themselves in this manner, shame like some dark fluid was spilled over my face. 'My life might be worse than that of a street dog', I concluded gloomily, 'but the morals of these human beings are more deplorable than an animal's.'

'Why should you live such a distasteful life?', someone inside me asked. 'Stop being a living corpse,' it advised. I decided to join the mainstream and be one among the many who believed social progress and death of morality go hand in hand. I would release the brute lying dormant in me and live life to the hilt. I would not be a defeatist like my father, an honest teacher. He had failed to face challenges and cowered in the face of every little odd. I would not shed helpless tears like them or curse society. Nor would I blame or beg God. I have learnt one does not need a God in order to survive in the jungle of human beasts, but the craft to counter the stack of odds. There is nothing called God. If ever there was one, He is dead now. That God would never have foreseen how treacherous life could turn out to be!

Hence, I took a vow to eliminate my humanity. First I killed my conscience, severed the ties of relationships next. I knew no man can kill another unless he killed himself first. I wiped out all sense of righteousness, ruthlessly rubbed off all moral and ideals from the canvass of my soul. I was filled

passare una banconota falsa. Gli vennero rivolte false accuse e fu licenziato dal lavoro. La sua efficienza, la sua onestà e la sua sincerità non lo salvarono. Inflisse su di sé la punizione dell'autoesilio e si trasferì altrove con la famiglia. La figlia più grande decise di prendere sulle sue spalle la responsabilità della casa e riuscì a trovare un lavoretto sottopagato con quel poco di istruzione che aveva ricevuto. Ma le cose andarono ancora peggio. Lei, come la maggior parte delle ragazze in situazioni simili, veniva costantemente perseguitata dagli sguardi viscidati di un gruppo di giovani uomini senza morale e, alla fine, un giorno, mentre tornava dal posto di lavoro, la costrinsero a salire su una macchina e la portarono via, in un posto sperduto. Mio padre sparse denuncia ufficiale contro di loro alla polizia e il caso fu archiviato. Ma i figli dei pezzi grossi sono spesso intoccabili dalla legge. Loro, tuttavia, la rimandarono indietro illesa qualche tempo dopo. Non so se fossero mossi dalla pietà o dalla paura. Ma l'accaduto era troppo forte da sopportare per mia sorella. Si impiccò. Il suo corpo pendeva dal gancio in camera. Mio padre sedeva nella veranda con gli occhi asciutti, la bocca spalancata. Mentre stava seduto lì, con la mano sulla testa, il suo sguardo assente fissava nel vuoto del cielo. Una jeep ben decorata e dotata di un altoparlante che gridava forti slogan femministi, passò per la strada sul retro della nostra casa.

Qualche immagine confusa di progresso sociale allineata nel tracciato dei ricordi iniziò ad avanzare una dopo l'altra e un grido soffocato di disperazione mi sfuggì dalla gola nonostante i miei maggiori sforzi per spingerlo al suo posto. Vedevo un insegnante del college malmenato dai sicari sotto le vesti di operatori sociali per l'offesa di aver colto sul fatto uno studente mentre stava copiando. Ce n'era un altro, un gruppo vandali che in una strada affollata strappava a un anziano il suo unico mezzo di sostentamento, la pensione. L'uomo aveva urlato, ma nessuno era corso in suo aiuto; la moto schizzò via e si confuse in mezzo al flusso dei veicoli che correvano per la strada.

L'incapacità di mio padre di sopportare quel sistema corrotto, l'agonia della mia debole madre che non sapeva fare altro che maledire il suo destino, l'immagine del corpo meschino, privo di vita di mia sorella erano prove troppo difficili da superare per me. Con la determinazione di chiedere aiuto ai detentori dello scettro della giustizia, mi sono rivolto agli uomini al vertice degli affari. Nessuno ebbe compassione per me; quelli ai quali avevo chiesto aiuto barcollavano fuori dal bar in pieno giorno. I loro sguardi persi non notavano neanche una creatura misera come me. Né la mia richiesta e la mia lamentela raggiungevano le loro insensibili orecchie. Fui invece schernito e preso a calci sul ciglio della strada come un cane randagio. Quando vidi i potenti screditare se stessi in questa maniera, la vergogna si versò sul mio volto come un liquido scuro. "La mia vita probabilmente è peggiore di quella di un cane di strada", conclusi malinconicamente, "ma la morale di questi esseri umani è più deplorabile di quella di un animale".

"Perché vivere una vita così priva di piacere?", chiese una voce dentro di me. "Smetti di essere un cadavere vivente," mi consigliò. Decisi di unirmi alla massa e di essere uno dei tanti che credevano che il progresso sociale e la morte della moralità andassero a braccetto. Avrei liberato il brutto che giaceva dormiente dentro di me e avrei vissuto fino in fondo. Non sarei stato un rinunciatario come mio padre, un insegnante onesto. Lui non era riuscito ad affrontare le sfide e aveva indietreggiato davanti a ogni singola possibilità. Io non avrei versato lacrime di debolezza o maledetto la società come avevano fatto loro. Né avrei incolpato o pregato Dio. Ho imparato che non serve avere un Dio per sopravvivere nella giungla delle bestie umane, ma l'abilità di contrastare la mole di possibilità. Non esiste nulla che si chiami Dio. Se mai ce ne fosse stato uno, adesso è morto. Quel Dio non avrebbe mai previsto quanto potesse rivelarsi infida la vita!

Quindi, giurai, avrei eliminato la mia umanità. Prima uccisi la mia coscienza, poi tagliai ogni relazione. Sapevo che nessun uomo può uccidere gli altri senza aver prima ucciso se stesso. Spazzai

with abhorrence when I watched the old world values, humanitarian principles metamorphosing all the while under the pressure of selfish motives. Heavenly bodies have never violated the law of nature and have never been guided by selfish interests, nor have the air and water ever been miserly in showering their benefits upon mankind. Man, perhaps, is the most uncouth, unscrupulous creature in God's world, I decided. Slowly, I began to lose faith in all beautiful objects. I could not stand the fragrance of flowers. I would have liked to uproot all flowering plants and grow a forest of cactus, the lightest touch of which would have drawn blood. Words like pity, compassion, penitence and love had no meaning as far as I was concerned. Crimes filled me with elation. I rejoiced at the sight of a mother trading her child for a handful of rice, the dishevelled hair and torn clothes of a molested woman, the gory, distorted figure of a murdered human being and an educated boy engaged in shoe-polishing by the roadside. Man fought a bloody battle with another man at the smallest provocation. I was terribly excited at the sound of the battle-cry. I am eager to have all human virtues replaced by a brute instinct. I shall send a destructive stir through the little calm that has somehow managed still to exist. The virus of annihilation bred in the heaps of violence and terrorism around me has entered my blood and proliferated into millions. I will contaminate civilisation and extinguish it. I will shoot an arrow of conspiracy and distrust to pierce humanity at its very heart. I will scatter seeds of fiendish crime everywhere. I shall laugh aloud when Mother Earth would beg from the Creator the boon of blessed barrenness. 'Let the world that has been shunned of humanity be eliminated', she would cry in despair. She has reached a stage where she would not be able to bring in new lives; she cannot lend them her salubrious lap to grow up in. I represent the final batch of mankind she has produced. And I am her loved one. The memory of my noble precursors might at times bring a flood of nostalgic tears to her eyes, but she knows the truth that it is this last batch of humanity that will guide her to the path of salvation. The mechanised men of the twenty-first century will spin around in a diabolical whirlpool till the catastrophe strikes. Mother Earth might be muttering curses camouflaged under benediction on me.

But I will never die. I am the man of the century. I shall preserve and nurture my being, and continue to exist in the demonic, spiralling tides of decadence.

via tutto il senso di giustizia, cancellai senza pietà tutta la morale e tutti gli ideali intessuti nella mia anima. Mi riempivo di avversione quando guardavo i valori del vecchio mondo, principi umanitari che subivano una metamorfosi, schiacciati dalla pressione di fini egoistici. I corpi celesti non hanno mai violato le leggi della natura e non sono mai stati guidati da interessi egoistici, né l'aria e l'acqua sono mai stati avari nel versare i loro benefici sul genere umano. L'uomo, forse, è la creatura più rozza e spregiudicata del mondo di Dio, conclusi. Lentamente, iniziai a perdere fede in tutti gli oggetti belli. Non riuscivo più a sopportare la fragranza dei fiori. Avrei voluto estirpare tutte le piante fiorite e far crescere foreste di cactus, il cui più lieve tocco avrebbe fatto sanguinare. Parole come pietà, compassione, penitenza e amore non avevano significato per quanto mi riguardava. I crimini mi riempivano di gioia. Mi rallegravo vedendo una madre che barattava suo figlio per un pugno di riso, i capelli arruffati e i vestiti strappati di una donna molestata, l'aspetto sfigurato e insanguinato di un essere umano ucciso e un ragazzo istruito impegnato a lustrare scarpe per strada. Uomini che si picchiavano ferocemente alla minima provocazione. Ero tremendamente eccitato dal suono del grido di battaglia. Sono impaziente di rimpiazzare tutte le virtù umane con l'istinto bruto. Potrei inviare un impulso distruttivo attraverso quel poco di calma che è riuscito in qualche modo a esistere ancora. Il virus dell'annientamento si riprodusse laddove si annidava la violenza e il terrorismo attorno a me penetrò il mio sangue e si moltiplicò a milioni. Contaminerò la civiltà e la estinguerò. Scaglierò una freccia di complotto e sospetto per trafiggere il cuore dell'umanità. Spargerò semi di crimine diabolico ovunque. Riderei forte se Madre Natura pregasse al Creatore la manna di una benedetta infertilità. "Lascia che il mondo che è stato evitato dall'umanità venga eliminato", urlerebbe di disperazione. Ha raggiunto uno stadio in cui non è più in grado di accogliere nuove vite; non può prestare loro il suo salubre grembo per farli crescere. Io rappresento la partita finale del genere umano che lei ha prodotto. E sono il suo amato. La memoria dei miei nobili precursori potrebbe portarle, talvolta, un'alluvione di lacrime nostalgiche, ma lei sa la verità: è quest'ultima partita di umanità che la guiderà verso il cammino per la salvezza. Gli uomini meccanizzati del ventunesimo secolo gireranno in una ruota infernale finché la catastrofe non li colpirà. Madre Natura mi lancerà maledizioni nascoste sotto forma di benedizioni.

Ma io non morirò mai. Io sono l'uomo del secolo. Preserverò e nutrirò il mio essere, e continuerò a esistere nelle maree demoniache e crescenti della decadenza.

A Mother from Kalahandi

Gayatri Sharaf

Tr. Sumanyu Satpathy

They hadn't seen, nor did they want to see each other before their marriage. Only after the proposals came and the parents had given their consent, did they accept each other in heart, soul and mind. On the fourth night after their wedding, the night of consummation, they saw each other for the first time. After lifting her veil, Swapnesh looked intently at Amrita. He swooned over her beauty. The poet in him said, 'I knew it, you are like the petals of a rose. You smile like the moon. You are like the nectar your name implies. In fact, I fell in love with you the day I heard your name and will continue loving you throughout my life.' The room was filled with the fragrance of flowers, the echoes of sweet nothings spoken. Amrita lifted her eyes to look at Swapnesh, who had turned a poet in this dreamy ambience, and said, 'I too have loved you since I heard your name, and have woven my dreams around you. Look, I'm very sentimental, so please don't shatter my dreams. Don't ever be unfaithful to me.'

Usually such honey talk ends with those sweet nights. The stark reality of life takes the fore, where dreams come only to evaporate; life, where flowers bloom only alongside thorns. Only for the lucky few do dreams never shatter, and thorns never sting. They walk the path of life, hand in hand, like companions.

Amrita and Swapnesh were one such fortunate couple. After the honeymoon, they did face many hurdles in life, yet never allowed them to affect their life adversely.

The sweet fragrance of the first night was still with them. They felt proud of the dreams and flowers, the fragrances of which continued to swathe their lives.

Amrita felt that, with their distinct attitudes, they were a very different couple than the others.

There was no streak of suspicion or any feeling of misunderstanding in their lives. 'Neither of us is superior or inferior to the other. Whatever there is in us to be admired, we admire, and whatever to be ignored, we ignore'. This was the way Amrita thought. Like a seed, these thoughts germinated in her mind to become a magnificent tree with leaves and flowers. The nectar in those flowers sweetened their lives at every moment.

Swapnesh was a bit fickle, a little undisciplined, with a carefree disposition. He was absentminded to such an extent that he would look for his pen, which all the while would be in his pocket. He forgot to carry his important files when going to court, but remembered Amrita's zodiac sign and birthday as well as their wedding anniversary. On those special days, he used to come home early with a bouquet of flowers as a gift. He would be smiling like a naughty boy.

Amrita, too, would smile. She also remembered his likes and dislikes, his wants and wishes. She eagerly waited for him to return every day and then talked to him lovingly, sweetly.

Swapnesh always had a soft spot for the poor and the helpless. Whenever any of them came for legal help, he gave it for free. Amrita admired him for this. But of late she had become critical of his too simple, down-to-earth nature. He was a reputed man and was well established in society. She wanted him to behave like a person who had authority, power. But no, he was always the same, open-hearted, good old Swapnesh. Friends, relatives, colleagues, everyone liked them both. Whoever came in contact with them could tell that they were a really happy couple. There were unique. Yet, they had their share of enemies. Many liked them and some envied them.

Una madre di Kalahandi

Gayatri Sharaf

Tr. Sumanyu Satpathy

Non si erano visti, né avevano voluto vedersi prima del loro matrimonio. Solo dopo che era arrivata la proposta e i genitori avevano dato il consenso, si erano vicendevolmente accettati nel cuore, nell'anima e nella mente. La quarta notte dopo il matrimonio, la notte del compimento, si videro per la prima volta. Dopo averle sollevato il velo, Swapnesh guardò Amrita con attenzione. Andò in estasi per la sua bellezza. Il poeta dentro di lui disse, "Io lo so, tu sei come i petali di una rosa. Sorridi come la luna. Sei come il nettare evocato dal tuo nome. Infatti, mi sono innamorato di te dal momento in cui ti ho sentita nominare e continuerò ad amarti per tutta la vita." Il profumo dei fiori riempiva la stanza, insieme all'eco delle dolci parole non dette. Amrita alzò gli occhi per guardare Swapnesh, che si era trasformato in un poeta in questo ambiente da sogno, e disse: "Anch'io ti ho amato dal momento in cui ho sentito il tuo nome, e ho tessuto i miei sogni attorno a te. Ascolta, sono molto emotiva, quindi ti prego, non frantumare i miei sogni. Non tradire mai la mia fiducia."

Di solito discorsi così teneri finiscono con quelle notti dolci. La cruda realtà della vita prende il sopravvento, e i sogni vengono solo per evaporare; la vita, dove i fiori sbocciano solo accompagnati da spine. Solo per i pochi fortunati i sogni non si infrangono mai, e le spine non pungono mai. Questi camminano lungo il sentiero della vita, mano nella mano, come compagni.

Amrita e Swapnesh erano una di quelle coppie bacciate dalla fortuna. Dopo la luna di miele, affrontarono tanti ostacoli insieme, tuttavia non permettendo a questi ultimi di influenzare negativamente la loro vita.

La dolce fragranza della prima notte li accompagnava ancora. Erano orgogliosi dei sogni e dei fiori, il cui profumo continuava ad avvolgerli.

Amrita sentiva che, con i loro comportamenti seppur distinti, erano una coppia molto diversa dalle altre. Non c'era ombra di sospetto, né di alcun sentimento di incomprensione nelle loro vite. "Nessuno di noi è superiore o inferiore all'altro. Qualsiasi aspetto sia da ammirare in noi, lo ammiriamo, e qualsiasi aspetto sia da ignorare, lo ignoriamo". Questo era quello che pensava Amrita. Come un seme, questi pensieri germogliarono nella sua mente fino a diventare un maestoso albero con foglie e fiori. Il nettare di quei fiori addolciva le loro vite in ogni momento.

Swapnesh era un po' volubile, un po' indisciplinato, con un'indole spensierata. Era distratto al punto tale da non trovare la sua penna, che nel frattempo aveva in tasca. Andava in tribunale dimenticando documenti importanti, ma ricordava il segno zodiacale e il compleanno di Amrita, così come il loro anniversario di matrimonio. In quelle occasioni speciali, tornava a casa presto con un mazzo di fiori in dono. Sorrideva come un bambino disobbediente.

Anche Amrita sorrideva. Anche lei ricordava le cose che gli piacevano e quelle che gli piacevano meno, i suoi desideri e le sue necessità. Aspettava con impazienza che lui tornasse ogni giorno e poi gli parlava con amore e dolcezza.

Swapnesh aveva sempre avuto un debole per i poveri e gli indifesi. Ogni volta che una persona in difficoltà chiedeva aiuto legale, lui lo prestava gratuitamente. Amrita lo ammirava per questo. Ma di recente aveva iniziato a criticare la sua natura troppo semplice e pratica. Era un uomo di buona

Ten years of their life passed ever so swiftly, ever so happily. In spite of giving all this happiness, life seemed to have withheld something from them. That something, like a virus, was growing in her in such a way that it almost overshadowed everything. Real happiness eluded Amrita. However much she tried to get that something from life, it was denied to her. As if life was playing a game—a game of giving something one did not want and keeping back something that one wanted so much. At times she thought she had overcome that grief. But can any woman really overcome such a want? Because this one want creates the greatest of all great voids in a woman's life. Yes, Amrita was childless. She always wanted a little Swapnesh. But this little Swapnesh never came into her life. Medical reports made it clear that she would never become a mother. She had cried her heart out that day, resting her head on Swapnesh's chest. He wiped her tears with his lips. 'Everyone has some grief, some want. One has to live with it. One has to bear the joys and sorrows of life, Amrita. The rules of fate are very strange. She who wants a child remains barren, yet she who doesn't has many children. Many unwanted children are born on this earth. They have neither the warm cosy laps of mothers, nor the strong hands of fathers to comfort them. These orphans look for some shelter. That's how the orphanages have come into being. In our city, too, there is one with the name of Ashray. Would you like to go there? If you want to do something for them, they would need you, love you and call you Mummy', said Swapnesh.

Amrita kept quiet. Swapnesh thought that maybe she wasn't interested. But she went. When she looked at them, something in the faces of these poor, helpless children made her feel suffocated. She was about to go back home, when a tiny little girl came and stood in front of her. Holding her hands, she said, 'Whoever comes here goes back never to come again, but please do not go away.

We don't have anyone....' Amrita couldn't go back; she went to the market and bought a packet of fruit, bread and biscuits for them. She distributed these things with her own hands. Then she went again after a gap of a few days. Her regular visits slowly yet steadily brought her closer to them in a bond of love. Not only did she give them fruit and biscuits, but also her love and affection—she became a mother to them. Only then did she feel that she had overcome that want of hers. No longer was she the dried-up parched land, but a fertile one with incessant rain of love pouring over her. She got acquainted with other social organisations and began spending more and more time outside the boundaries of her home. She shared the happiness as well as the grief of others. Rumours began to spread that Amrita was going to join politics and run in the elections, and that this was only the first round of preparation.

But Amrita knew that it was not politics, but a principle she had adopted in her life. Swapnesh was always at her side, encouraging her. A few years passed like this for Amrita and Swapnesh, both losing themselves in work and weaving dreams. But in spite of their busy schedule, their love and trust for each other always remained, making their home a sweet home. One fine morning, Swapnesh got up early and went out in his car, telling Amrita that he would be away for three days. 'Do have your meals on time, go to bed on time and take care of yourself. Remember what happened to you after your return from Kalahandi? If it happens again, I won't allow you to go out any more,' said Amrita, with wifely concern.

Swapnesh promised to take care of himself. 'You, too—promise to stay indoors all three days, read books, watch TV and listen to Ghulam Ali's love songs', he said before leaving.

She suddenly realised that, actually, she had not read any books or listened to any music lately. After Swapnesh left, Amrita did decide to spend all three days indoors. She would spend the whole time on herself alone. In the afternoon, when she was watching TV, a telephone call came from Ashray. The girl who had been brought to the orphanage only a few days ago had suddenly fallen ill. Amrita

reputazione e ben piazzato nella società. Voleva che lui si comportasse come una persona con autorità e potere. Ma no, lui era sempre lo stesso, con il cuore aperto, il buon vecchio Swapnesh. Amici, parenti, colleghi, tutti li apprezzavano. Chiunque veniva a contatto con loro capiva all'istante che erano una coppia felice. Erano unici. Eppure, avevano anche loro dei nemici. Molti li apprezzavano e alcuni li invidiavano.

Dieci anni dopo la loro vita era passata così veloce, così felice. Nonostante avesse dato loro tutta quella felicità, la vita sembrava non concedere loro qualcosa. Quel qualcosa, come un virus, cresceva in Amrita in modo tale da quasi oscurare tutto il resto. La vera felicità le sfuggiva. Per quanto lei provasse a ottenere quel qualcosa, le veniva negato. Come se la vita stesse giocando uno scherzo, lo scherzo di dare qualcosa che non si desidera e di non concedere quello che si desiderava tanto. A volte pensava di aver superato quel dolore. Ma può, una qualsiasi donna, davvero superare un bisogno simile? Perché proprio questo desiderio crea il più grande dei grandi vuoti nella vita di una donna. Sì, Amrita non aveva figli. Aveva sempre desiderato un piccolo Swapnesh. Ma questo piccolo Swapnesh non arrivava mai.. Gli esami medici stabilirono con chiarezza che non sarebbe mai diventata madre. Aveva pianto disperatamente quel giorno, poggiando la testa sul petto di Swapnesh. Lui le aveva asciugato le lacrime con le labbra. “Tutti hanno dolori, desideri. Bisogna vivere con essi. Bisogna accettare sia le gioie, sia i dolori della vita, Amrita. Le regole del destino sono molto strane. Coi che vuole figli rimane sterile, mentre coei che non vuole ha molti bambini. Nascono su questa terra molti figli non desiderati. Non hanno né il grembo caldo e accogliente delle madri, né le mani forti dei padri a confortarli. Questi orfani cercano rifugio. È così che sono nati gli orfanotrofi. Anche nella nostra città ce n'è uno che si chiama Ashray. Vorresti andarci? Se volessi fare qualcosa per loro, loro avrebbero bisogno di te, ti amerebbero e ti chiamerebbero mamma”, disse Swapnesh.

Amrita restò in silenzio. Swapnesh pensò che, forse, non fosse interessata. Ma lei andò. Quando li vide, qualcosa nei volti di quei poveri bambini indifesi la fece sentire soffocare. Stava per tornare a casa, quando una bambina si parò davanti a lei. Stringendole le mani, disse, “Tutte le persone che vengono qui, se ne vanno per non tornare mai più, ma ti prego, non andartene. Non abbiamo nessuno...”. Amrita non riuscì ad andare a casa; andò al mercato e comprò un sacco di frutta, pane e biscotti per loro. Distribuí il tutto con le sue stesse mani. Poi tornò di nuovo, dopo qualche giorno. Le sue visite regolari la portarono lentamente ma fortemente più vicina a quei bambini in un legame d'amore. Non solo dava loro frutta e biscotti, ma anche amore e affetto; divenne una figura materna per loro. Solo allora sentì di dover superare quel suo desiderio. Non era più una terra secca e assetata, ma una terra fertile, bagnata da un'incessante pioggia d'amore. Fece conoscenza con altre organizzazioni sociali e iniziò a passare sempre più tempo fuori dalle mura di casa. Condivideva sia la felicità sia il dolore degli altri. Iniziarono a circolare voci che Amrita avrebbe iniziato a fare attività politica e che si sarebbe candidata per le elezioni, e che questo fosse solo il suo primo giro di preparazione.

Ma Amrita sapeva che non si trattava di politica, ma di un principio che aveva ormai preso parte della sua vita. Swapnesh era sempre al suo canto, incoraggiandola. Passarono alcuni anni così, per Amrita e Swapnesh, entrambi perdendo se stessi nel lavoro e nel tessere sogni. Ma nonostante i numerosi impegni, l'amore e la fiducia che avevano l'uno per l'altra rimase sempre, rendendo la loro casa una dolce casa. Una bella mattina, Swapnesh si alzò presto e andò in macchina, dicendo ad Amrita che sarebbe stato via per tre giorni. “Mangia agli orari giusti, vai a letto presto e prenditi cura di te. Ricordi che cosa ti è successo dopo il tuo ritorno da Kalahandi? Se succede di nuovo, non ti lascerò più uscire”, disse Amrita, da buona moglie preoccupata.

felt a little irritated, and said, 'I'm also not feeling all that well. So please ring up the orphanage doctor. He can come and see the girl.'

But after saying this she began to feel restless. The face of that little girl danced in front of her eyes again and again. She asked for an auto-rickshaw and went straight to Ashray. On her way home, she suddenly got a jolt when their car drove past her auto-rickshaw. She could not believe her eyes. 'Is it Swapnesh?', she asked herself. She could be wrong about the car, but she could never make a mistake about Swapnesh. Had he not gone away? Or had he come back? Reaching home, she enquired and found out that Swapnesh had not returned. She became worried and restless. Neither book nor cassette could take her mind off Swapnesh. A host of doubts assailed her. Swapnesh returned on the third day. The moment he arrived, as was his wont, he took her into his arms. She freed herself and looked intently at him. It was the same Swapnesh whom she had seen that day. She felt like asking, but held back. Approaching her forties as she was, her eyes could have deceived her. She thought of this and kept herself under control.

Again one day, Swapnesh said, 'Look, I've an important appointment today. So I've got to leave early.' 'The workload has increased for you as well as me. But how long can we go on like this? We have done enough work, enough social services. Now we should live only for ourselves. I should devote all of my time to you and you to me,' replied Amrita while preparing tea.

'Alright, alright, as you please, but I do have to go early today,' said Swapnesh.

He finished his tea and went to the portico to start the car. 'I'll be having my lunch out; so you should have yours on time,' he said, starting the car. 'No more of this. I'll keep you close to me, let the world think what it likes to,' she told herself. After lunch she got ready to go to Ashray. That day a Gujrati couple were to come to adopt a girl child. People used to come to adopt these homeless and helpless children. And this was a tremendous thing. Amrita was lost in such thoughts. Suddenly the rickshaw stopped. Her thoughts were disrupted. The rickshaw-puller fixed the chain, which had come off, and wiped the sweat off his body with a towel before starting to pull the rickshaw again. 'Stop, please, stop.' The rickshaw-puller was a little taken aback and looked questioningly at her. At that moment her eyes were fixed on a distant scene. It was like the scene of an earthquake. Was it real or a dream? No, the sunlight was still there; so it could not be a dream. Her eyes were wide open. She saw Swapnesh and another woman walking together after getting out of the car. They entered a house and closed the door. *Look, I've an important appointment today. So I've got to leave early.* These words were ringing in her ears. She wanted to run to him and ask, 'Whose house is this? Who is this woman? Why have you come here?' But she could not utter any of these words. Instead, she asked the man to go faster as she was getting late. She entrusted the little girl to the Gujrati couple, crying a lot all the while. She slept that night with a fire raging in her heart. Swapnesh returned late. He wanted to sleep holding her tight. But she moved a little away, not allowing him to touch her. Whatever he asked, she answered with a 'yes' or a 'no'. She pretended to sleep, but sleep was miles away from her eyes. The whole night she tried to find out the truth, but in vain.

The next morning, after Swapnesh had gone to court, she went to that same house with a thudding heart to get her answers. She knocked at the door. The one who opened the door was not the same woman whom she had seen the day before. This was a girl, about seventeen or eighteen. She had a certain freshness about her and her face resembled the full moon in the month of Chaitra. 'What do you want', asked the girl with inquisitive eyes.

Actually what did she want from this tender-aged girl? For a moment it seemed as if she had come to a wrong place. But no, it was the same place, the same house where she had seen Swapnesh the

Swapnesh promise di prendersi cura di sé. “Anche tu, promettimi di stare in casa tutti e tre i giorni, di leggere libri, di guardare la TV e di ascoltare le canzoni d’amore di Ghulam Ali”, disse, prima di partire.

Si rese improvvisamente conto che, in effetti, ultimamente non aveva più letto libri o ascoltato musica. Dopo che Swapnesh era partito, Amrita decise di passare davvero quei tre giorni in casa. Avrebbe passato tutto il tempo da sola. Quel pomeriggio, mentre guardava la televisione, arrivò una telefonata da Ashray. La bambina che era stata portata all’orfanotrofio pochi giorni prima si era improvvisamente ammalata. Amrita si innervosì, e disse: “Anch’io non mi sento bene. Quindi, per favore, chiamate il dottore dell’orfanotrofio. Può venire lui a vedere la bambina.”

Ma dopo aver detto così, iniziò ad agitarsi. Il viso della piccola continuava a danzarle davanti agli occhi. Chiese un riscìo e andò ad Ashray. Tornando a casa, improvvisamente ebbe un colpo quando fu superata dalla loro auto. Non poté credere ai suoi occhi. “È Swapnesh?”, si chiese. Poteva aver confuso l’auto, ma non avrebbe mai potuto sbagliare su Swapnesh. Non era andato via? O era tornato? Arrivata a casa, controllò e scoprì che Swapnesh non era ancora tornato. Si preoccupò e si agitò. Né libri, né audiocassette riuscivano a distogliere il suo pensiero da Swapnesh. Una marea di dubbi la assalì. Swapnesh tornò il terzo giorno. Nel momento in cui arrivò, come d’abitudine, la strinse tra le braccia. Lei si liberò dall’abbraccio e lo guardò attentamente. Era lo stesso Swapnesh che aveva visto quel giorno. Avrebbe voluto chiederglielo, ma si trattenne. Avendo quasi quarant’anni, era possibile che i suoi occhi l’avessero ingannata. Con questo pensiero si controllò.

Ancora una volta, un giorno, Swapnesh disse: “Ascolta, ho un appuntamento importante oggi, quindi devo uscire presto”. “Il carico di lavoro è cresciuto sia per me sia per te. Ma quanto possiamo continuare così? Abbiamo fatto abbastanza lavoro, abbastanza servizi per il sociale. Ora dovremmo vivere solo per noi stessi. Io dovrei dedicare tutto il mio tempo a te e tu fare lo stesso con me.” Rispose Amrita, preparando il tè.

“D’accordo, d’accordo, come desideri, ma devo andare via presto oggi,” disse Swapnesh.

Finì il tè e andò verso il porticato per accendere la macchina. “Pranzerò fuori, quindi tu mangia senza aspettarmi,” disse, accendendo il motore. “Basta, ti terrò vicino a me, che il mondo pensi quello che vuole,” disse tra sé e sé. Dopo pranzo si preparò per andare ad Ashray. Quel giorno sarebbe venuta una coppia di Gujrati per adottare una bambina. Diverse persone venivano a adottare questi bambini indifesi e senza famiglia. Ed era una cosa meravigliosa. Amrita era persa in quei pensieri. Improvvisamente il riscìo si fermò. I suoi pensieri si interruppero. Il carrettiere aggiustò la catena che era uscita di sede e si pulì dal sudore con un asciugamano prima di ripartire. “Fermo, per favore, fermo”. Il carrettiere rimase un po’ interdetto e la guardò con aria interrogativa. In quel momento i suoi occhi erano fissi su un’immagine lontana. Quell’immagine fu come un terremoto. Era realtà o stava sognando? No, il sole era ancora lì, non poteva essere un sogno. Aveva gli occhi spalancati. Vide Swapnesh e un’altra donna camminare insieme dopo essere scesi dall’auto. I due entrarono in una casa e chiusero la porta. *Ascolta, ho un appuntamento importante oggi, quindi devo uscire presto.* Queste parole le risuonavano nelle orecchie. Voleva correre da lui e chiedergli: “Di chi è questa casa? Chi è questa donna? Perché siete qui?” ma non sarebbe riuscita a pronunciare neanche una parola. Invece, chiese al carrettiere di andare più veloce poiché stava facendo tardi. Affidò la bambina alla coppia di Gujrati, mentre piangeva a dirotto. Dormì quella notte con il fuoco che le ribolliva nel cuore. Swapnesh tornò tardi. Voleva dormire stringendola forte a sé. Ma lei si spostò e non gli permise di toccarla. Qualsiasi cosa chiedesse, lei rispondeva con un “sì” o un “no”. Finse di dormire, ma il sonno era lontano chilometri dai suoi occhi. Per tutta la notte cercò di scoprire la verità, ma invano.

day before. But this fact she kept to herself. 'I have come to take a survey, but suddenly I feel thirsty. Could you please give me some water to drink?' asked Amrita. 'Oh, sure, do come inside and be seated', the girl said and went to fetch a glass of water. Looking at the girl once again, Amrita said, 'You are really very beautiful. What's your name?' The girl felt a little shy at this. Tying her hair into a bun she replied:

'I'm Kumari.'

'Oh, what a beautiful name! Do you live here alone?'

'No, I have a daughter. She is asleep.'

'Oh, you are married then... your husband?' The girl giggled at the word 'husband', and said, 'I am not married. But I have a home and a child.'

'How come?'

Suddenly her giggles stopped, and she looked sad.

'No, I can't tell you. Sir has asked me not to tell anybody. If I do that, he'll sell me in some place far away.'

Amrita got a jolt at this talk of selling. Holding Kumari's hand, she made her sit on the cot.

'You have given me water to quench my thirst. You seem to be having some problem. Why don't you tell me? I am like a mother to you. Who is he? Who would sell you?' asked Amrita.

Kumari stared at Amrita. It was apparent from her looks that she had never heard such kind and loving words. Her eyes became moist. It seemed to her as if Amrita was indeed her mother, who would not sell her. Leaning a little closer, she asked:

'Have you heard the name of Kalahandi?'

'Yes, I've,' and this name Kalahandi bothered her a little.

'Mahul Gharana is a small village in Kalahandi; I belong to that village. The village was so called because at one time it was overgrown with mahul flowers. But there are no more of them. It is a dry, lifeless place now. Everywhere there is only 'hunger'. Everybody is overcome by hunger. It is a dream to get a handful of rice. For days together, the hearth is without fire, so no question of the pots and pans getting burnt. Because of this hunger, many people left Raipur. Many died after eating poisonous food, and many parents are forced to sell their offspring, for paltry sums of money, only to survive a few more days. There is no more work, no labour, no help and no hope for us. At a time like this, some gentlemen from the city came to our village. They held some meetings, took our photographs and said that they would go and appeal to the government on our behalf. There was nothing to be cooked in our house or at anybody's. My mother and we two sisters had only some forest potatoes and berries to eat. One of the gentlemen came to our house and took our photographs inside. My mother said, "When will the government listen to our plight—that we do not know, but we know you, because you have come to us. If you listen to our problems, you become the government for us." Then she showed him my seven-year-old sister and said, "I would like to sell her. Are you interested in buying?"'

'The man saw my sister and also me, standing by my mother. He looked at my body and said, "Perhaps she is your eldest daughter. If you would sell her, I would buy her for three hundred rupees."

"How much is that?" my mother enquired. The man made her understand the value of three hundred rupees by showing her how much flour and rice she could buy with that kind of money. At that time my mother was crying, holding my hand. She wiped away her tears when she understood the value,

La mattina seguente, dopo che Swapnesh era andato in tribunale, si diresse verso quella stessa casa con il cuore a mille per trovare le risposte che stava cercando. La persona che aprì la porta non era la stessa donna che aveva visto il giorno prima. Era una ragazza, di circa diciassette o diciotto anni. Aveva un'aria di freschezza e il suo viso ricordava la luna piena nel mese di Chaitra. “Che cosa vuole?”, chiese la ragazza con sguardo inquisitorio.

Del resto, che cosa poteva volere da un'adolescente? Per un momento sembrava che fosse giunta nel posto sbagliato. Ma no, era lo stesso luogo, la stessa casa dove aveva visto Swapnesh il giorno prima. Ma si tenne questo fatto per sé. “Sono qui per fare un sondaggio, ma improvvisamente mi è venuta sete. Potresti per favore darmi qualcosa da bere?” chiese Amrita. “Oh, certo, entri e si sieda”, disse la ragazza andando a prendere un bicchiere d'acqua. Osservando ancora una volta la ragazza, Amrita disse, “Sei davvero molto bella. Come ti chiami?” La giovane si vergognò un po' per questo. Rispose, raccogliendo i capelli in un muccetto:

“Sono Kumari”

“Oh, che bel nome! Vivi qui da sola?”

“No, ho una figlia. Sta dormendo.”

“Oh, quindi sei sposata...tuo marito?” La ragazza ridacchiò alla parola “marito”, e disse: “Non sono sposata. Ma ho una casa e una bambina”.

“Come mai?”

D'improvviso si interruppe la sua risatina, e si rattristì.

“No, non posso dirglielo. Il signore mi ha detto di non dirlo a nessuno. Se lo facessi, mi venderebbe a qualcuno, lontano da qui.”

Amrita fu scossa a sentire parlare di vendita. Stringendo la mano di Kumari, la fece sedere sulla branda.

“Mi hai dato acqua per dissetarmi. Sembra che tu abbia un problema, perché non me lo dici? Sono come una madre per te. Chi è lui? Chi ti venderebbe?” chiese Amrita.

Kumari fissò Amrita. Sembrava, dal suo sguardo, che non avesse mai sentito parole così gentili e amorevoli. Le si inumidirono gli occhi. Si sentì come se Amrita fosse davvero sua madre, la quale non l'avrebbe venduta. Avvicinandosi, le chiese:

“Ha mai sentito il nome Kalahandi?”

“Sì, ne ho sentito parlare”, e questo nome Kalahandi la preoccupò.

“Mahul Gharana è un piccolo villaggio a Kalahandi; io sono di quel villaggio. Ha questo nome perché un tempo era ricca di fiori mahul. Ma adesso non ce ne sono più. Ora è un luogo arido, privo di vita. Ovunque, lì, è solo fame. Tutti sono sopraffatti dalla fame. È un sogno ricevere una manciata di riso. Per giorni, il focolare è privo di fuoco, così non c'è il problema delle pentole e delle padelle che si bruciano. A causa della fame, tante persone hanno lasciato Raipur. Molti sono morti dopo aver mangiato cibo avvelenato, e molti genitori sono costretti a vendere i loro figli, per misere somme di denaro, solo per poter sopravvivere qualche giorno. Non c'è più lavoro, aiuto o speranza per noi. In un periodo del genere, alcuni gentiluomini dalla città vennero nel nostro villaggio. Organizzarono incontri, ci fecero delle fotografie e dissero che sarebbero andati a lamentarsi al governo a nostro nome. Non c'era nulla da cucinare in casa nostra, o nella casa di nessun altro. Mia madre e noi due

and said to me, “Go, go with him, Kumari, now that I have sold you to him.” I said, “No, I don’t want to go with him.” Then my mother said, “Your best friend has also been bought by another gentleman. She is in the city now. She is getting two square meals every day. If you go, too, you can also get rice to eat every day.”

‘I fell into the trap. I thought that if I agreed my mother and sister could survive for a few days.

So I came with him. When I sat in the car, I asked whether I would get rice every day or not.

‘Pressing my arms, the man said, “If you listen to me, I’ll give you rice and also mutton. Besides, I’ll give you many other things.” “What do I have to do?” I asked.

‘Pulling me towards him, the man said, “I’ll take care of your hunger, and you take care of mine.”

‘I said, “Are you joking, Sir? You people are city-bred. How can you still be hungry?”

““You are grown up, how can you not understand that like the hunger for food, there is another hunger, the hunger for flesh?”

‘The way he was sitting, the way he was talking, I began to understand that there was this other hunger for flesh. Yet I said, “What about your home, your wife?”

““Yes, I do have a wife, but she is not enough to satiate my hunger. That’s the reason I bought you. I’ll give you a place to stay in and also good food to eat.”” Sir told me all these things. And he kept his word—I don’t have any wants. But when I conceived this girl, he did not feel happy. He said, “I don’t want any complications, any problems. If you deliver this child, you will lose your figure, your beauty, so let’s go to the doctor and abort this child.”

‘But I didn’t agree to this. I gave birth to this girl. He got annoyed and changed his behaviour towards me. After this incident, he no longer bothered about me. Yesterday he brought another girl here. When I complained, he said, “if you tell anyone, I’ll sell you again somewhere far away. So you had better keep quiet”.’

Amrita was listening. She was looking at this girl, Kumari. Her eyelids did not bat even once. She had no words to utter. With a lot of difficulty, she pronounced a few words, ‘What is his name, Kumari?’

‘I don’t know, but there is a photograph—want to see it? Yesterday he forgot his purse. His photo is in there. Please come, come inside. See my daughter and see her father also. Look, I tell you all this, thinking that you are so close to me. Please, do not tell this to anyone.’ Kumari stood up. Once again she invited Amrita inside. Amrita had no strength in her legs to go inside. In front of her eyes her trust of the last twenty years was going up in flames, leaving her world dark.

Although she got up, she was thinking and hoping against hope: ‘Let it be someone else’s purse; let the photograph be someone else’s.’

Kumari handed over the money purse to her. She recognised it immediately and closed her eyes with a feeling of excruciating pain. But in her closed eyes also she was seeing Swapnesh. Her mind was swimming in a pool of anguish; her body was burning with the fire of misery. Yet she was forced to keep quiet. Slowly she opened her eyes, looked at the sleeping child and turned her face away. Dragging her legs, she came out of the room and said, ‘I’m going, but I’ll come back.’ She did come back, but as a different person. Kumari was applying oil to the baby and it was giggling.

‘Suppose he sells you elsewhere?’ Amrita asked.

sorelle avevamo solo alcune patate della foresta e qualche bacca da mangiare. Uno dei gentiluomini venne da noi e ci fotografò in casa. Mia madre disse: “Quando ascolterà il nostro dolore, il governo? Noi non conosciamo il governo, ma conosciamo voi, perché siete venuti qui da noi. Se ascolterete i nostri problemi, diventerete il governo per noi.” Poi gli mostrò la mia sorellina di sette anni e disse, “Vorremmo venderla. È interessato a comprarla?”

“L’uomo vide mia sorella e anche me, vicina a mia madre. Mi squadrò da capo a piedi e disse: “Lei è la figlia più grande? Se la vendesse, la comprerei per trecento rupie”.

“Quanto è?” chiese mia madre. L’uomo le spiegò il valore di trecento rupie mostrandole quanta farina e riso avrebbe potuto comprare con quel denaro. In quel momento mia mamma stava piangendo, stringendomi la mano. Si asciugò le lacrime quando capì il valore e mi disse, “Vai, vai con lui Kumari, ora che ti ho venduta a lui.” Dissi: “No, non voglio andare con lui” Poi mia madre disse: “Anche la tua migliore amica è stata comprata da un altro gentiluomo. È in città adesso. Le danno due pasti completi ogni giorno. Se vai, anche tu puoi avere riso da mangiare ogni giorno.

“Caddi in quella trappola. Pensai che, se avessi accettato, mia madre e mia sorella sarebbero sopravvissute qualche giorno. Quindi andai con lui. Quando mi sedetti in macchina, chiesi se avrei ricevuto riso ogni giorno o no.

Stringendo le mie braccia, l’uomo mi disse: “Se mi ascolti, ti darò riso e anche carne di montone. Inoltre, ti darò anche molto altro”.

“Che cosa devo fare?” chiesi.

Tirandomi a sé, l’uomo mi disse: “Io mi occuperò della tua fame, tu ti occuperai della mia”.

Dissi: “Sta scherzando, signore? Voi siete cresciuti in città. Come fate ad avere ancora fame?”

“Ormai sei grande, come fai a non capire che, come la fame di cibo, esiste anche un altro genere di fame, la fame di carne?”

Il modo in cui sedeva, il modo in cui parlava, mi fece capire che esisteva anche quest’altra fame di carne. Allora dissi: “Ma allora la tua famiglia, tua moglie?”

“Sì, ho una moglie, ma non è abbastanza per saziarmi. È il motivo per cui ti ho comprata. Ti darò un posto dove stare e anche buon cibo da mangiare.” Il signore mi disse tutte queste cose. E mantenne la parola: non mi manca nulla. Ma quando concepì questa bambina, lui non fu felice. Disse: “Non voglio complicazioni o problemi. Se terrai il bambino, perderai le tue forme, la tua bellezza, quindi andiamo dal dottore e abortiamo”.

Ma io non accettai. Partorii la bambina. Lui si indispettì e cambiò atteggiamento nei miei confronti. Dopo questo incidente, non si è più preoccupato per me. Ieri ha portato qui un’altra ragazza. Quando mi sono lamentata, mi ha detto “Se lo dici a qualcuno, ti rivendo lontanissimo da qui. Quindi ti conviene tacere”.

Amrita ascoltava. Guardava la ragazza, Kumari. Non aveva sbattuto le palpebre neanche una volta. Non aveva parole. Con molta difficoltà pronunciò una frase: “Come si chiama l’uomo, Kumari?”

“Non lo so, ma ho una sua foto, vuole vederla? Ieri ha dimenticato il portafoglio qui. Dentro c’è la foto. Venga. Venga a vedere mia figlia e suo padre. Ascolti, le dico tutto questo, perché penso che lei mi sia vicina. La prego, non lo dica a nessuno”. Kumari si alzò. Ancora una volta invitò Amrita nella stanza. Amrita non aveva forza nelle gambe per entrare. Davanti ai suoi occhi la fiducia degli

‘I won’t go. I’ll report him to the police. And I’ll appeal to the government.’

‘But if no one listens to you, not even the police and government?’

‘You promised to do something.’

‘Yes, I’m thinking of sending you back to your village.’

‘Sir has bought me. Do you think he would allow it?’

‘That’s my headache; you have been sold, but that does not mean that your owner can make you his slave for life. You are free now.... So please go away.’

Kumari did not like this development. She lifted her baby and brought it close to her chest and looked a bit thoughtful. Keeping silent for a moment, she said, ‘Even if I go back to my village, I have to face the same fate—the hunger and going without food for days. Now I have this baby. She also would need food. Madam, please, give us a little shelter in your house. I’ll do all the household chores for you.’

Amrita felt uncomfortable. Turning her face away from Kumari, she said, ‘I already have too many servants in my house. So I really cannot keep you at my place. But why do you worry? I’ll look after you, and all the responsibilities of your house are going to be mine, including your mother and sister. Every month, I’ll send you money. You have to go back, and before that you have to give me something.’

Setting her daughter on the cot, Kumari said, ‘What have I got to give you?’

‘Yes, you do have something, you have a jewel. Can you give it to me?’ ‘Jewel?’

What jewel did she have, wondered Kumari.

‘I want your daughter.’

‘What will you do with my daughter?’

She could not reply. There was a jumble of thoughts in her mind.

‘You haven’t answered me,’ said Kumari.

‘I? I’ll keep her with me, and I am not going to sell her to anyone.’

This made Kumari at ease. She put a black dot on her daughter’s cheek to ward off the evil eye, planted a kiss on the child’s forehead and handed her over to Amrita, saying: ‘Once my mother sold me and today I’m selling off my daughter, with a heavy heart, to you. This is all for this stomach, and this hunger.’ Then she began to cry bitterly. The baby in Amrita’s lap opened her eyes at the sound of her mother crying and looked at her. She caught hold of a piece of her sari in her little hands, as if to say: ‘I am not an orphan. I’ll not go to an orphanage. Please take me home.’ Her touch, her look thrilled Amrita. A gust of wind from somewhere blew away all the smoke of any doubts that she felt. The love of a child and its mother was something that could not be betrayed.

In a voice full of authority, she said, ‘I’m taking your child to give her the rights she is entitled to. Just like any mother, the mother from Kalahandi bears the child in her womb, goes through labour pain, and feeds the baby with nectar from her body. Like their fellow Indians, the children from Kalahandi have the same right to love, food and clothing. They are not born to be sold. I cannot satisfy the hunger of the whole of Kalahandi, or cry my heart out over their misfortunes, yet I can tell society about your woes. I can tell the government that child-selling is not a usual thing in

ultimi vent'anni stava andando in fiamme, lasciandole un mondo oscuro. Ciononostante, si alzò, pensando e pregando contro ogni speranza: "Fa' che sia il portafoglio di qualcun altro; fa' che sia la foto di qualcun altro".

Kumari le diede il portafoglio. Lo riconobbe immediatamente e chiuse gli occhi, avvolta da un dolore straziante. Ma nei suoi occhi chiusi vedeva Swapnesh. Con la mente nuotava in un mare d'angoscia; il suo corpo bruciava nel fuoco della tristezza. Ma fu costretta a non dire nulla. Aprì lentamente gli occhi, guardò la bambina che dormiva e poi volse il suo sguardo altrove. Trascinando le gambe, uscì dalla stanza e disse: "Vado, ma tornerò." Effettivamente tornò, ma era un'altra persona. Kumari stava spalmando l'olio alla bambina che rideva.

"E se ti vende da qualche parte?" Chiese Amrita.

"Non andrò. Lo denuncerò alla polizia."

"Ma se nessuno ti ascoltasse, neanche la polizia e il governo?"

"Lei mi ha promesso di fare qualcosa."

"Sì, sto pensando di rimandarti al tuo villaggio."

"Il Signore mi ha comprata. Pensa che lo permetterebbe?"

"Lascia questo problema a me; sei stata venduta, ma questo non significa che il tuo proprietario può renderti sua schiava per la vita. Ora sei libera... Per favore, quindi, vattene."

A Kumari non piacquero questi sviluppi. Sollevò la bambina e la strinse al petto e assunse un aspetto pensoso. Stette in silenzio per un istante, poi disse: "Anche se tornassi al mio villaggio, dovrei affrontare lo stesso destino – la fame e lo stare giorni senza cibo. Ora ho questa bambina. Anche lei avrebbe bisogno di cibo. Signora, per favore, ci dia asilo in casa sua. Farò tutti i lavori di casa per lei."

Amrita si sentì a disagio. Distogliendo lo sguardo da Kumari, disse: "Ho già troppi servi in casa mia. Quindi non posso tenerti lì. Ma perché ti preoccupi? Mi occuperò di te, e tutte le responsabilità della tua casa diventeranno mie, incluse tua madre e tua sorella. Vi manderò soldi tutti i mesi. Devi tornare là, e prima devi darmi qualcosa."

Mettendo la bambina nella culla, Kumari disse, "Che cosa devo darle?"

"Sì, tu hai qualcosa, hai un gioiello. Puoi darmelo?"

"Gioiello?" Kumari si chiese quale gioiello avesse.

"Voglio tua figlia."

"Che cosa vuole fare a mia figlia?"

Non riuscì a rispondere. Aveva un mucchio di pensieri in mente.

"Non mi ha risposto", disse Kumari.

"Io? La terrò con me, e non la venderò a nessuno."

Questo tranquillizzò Kumari. Mise un puntino nero sulla guancia della bambina per allontanare gli occhi malvagi, le stampò un bacio sulla fronte e la diede ad Amrita, dicendo: "Una volta mia madre

mi vendette e oggi io le vendo mia figlia, con la morte nel cuore. Tutto ciò per questo stomaco, e questa fame.” Iniziò a piangere amaramente. La bambina sulle ginocchia di Amrita aprì gli occhi al Kalahandi. I can ask them to come out of their cocoons to go to see the mothers of Kalahandi, in whose hearts the fountain of love is streaming down as in any mother elsewhere.

They sell their children not for fun, but out of hunger, to live, to survive for a few more days. They sell their young girls to city-bred men just to provide themselves and their daughters with a few morsels of food.’

Kumari was listening to all this in awe. She could understand some of it and much else went over her head. But she had understood one fact: that she would be going back to her village. And that there she would get a square meal a day. She started to pack her belongings. Amrita stepped out and called to a man standing near the gate. She told him to take Kumari back to her village. She also put some cash into Kumari’s hands. The girl touched Amrita’s feet, kissed the baby and left. But from time to time she looked back.

mi vendette e oggi io le vendo mia figlia, con la morte nel cuore. Tutto ciò per questo stomaco, e questa fame.” Iniziò a piangere amaramente. La bambina sulle ginocchia di Amrita aprì gli occhi al suono del pianto della mamma e la guardò. Afferrò un pezzetto del suo sari tra le manine, come per dire: “Non sono un’orfana. Non andrò in orfanotrofio. Ti prego, portami a casa.” Il suo tocco e il suo sguardo rabbrivirono Amrita. Una folata di vento soffiò via tutto il fumo del dubbio che sentiva. L’amore tra un figlio e una madre è qualcosa che non si può tradire.

Con voce autorevole, disse: “Prendo tua figlia per darle i diritti che le spettano. Come qualsiasi altra madre, la madre di Kalahandi porta il bambino nel suo grembo, affronta il dolore del travaglio, e sfama il bimbo con il nettare del suo corpo. Come gli altri indiani, i bambini di Kalahandi hanno lo stesso diritto all’amore, al cibo e ai vestiti. Non sono nati per essere venduti. Non posso soddisfare la fame di tutta Kalahandi, o piangere tutte le mie lacrime per la loro disgrazia, ma posso parlare alla società del vostro dolore. Posso dire al governo che la vendita dei bambini non può diventare una cosa normale a Kalahandi. Posso chiedere loro di uscire dai loro bozzoli per andare a vedere le madri di Kalahandi, nei cui cuori la fontana dell’amore scorre come nei cuori di qualsiasi altra madre. Non vendono i loro figli per divertimento, ma per fame, per vivere, per sopravvivere per qualche giorno. Vendono le loro giovani figlie a uomini di città per garantire a se stesse e alle loro bambine qualche boccone.”

Kumari ascoltava a bocca aperta. Capiva alcune cose, molte altre la sorvolavano. Ma aveva capito una cosa: che sarebbe tornata al suo villaggio. E che lì avrebbe avuto un pasto completo al giorno. Iniziò a fare la valigia. Amrita uscì e chiamò un uomo che stava vicino al cancello. Gli disse di portare Kumari al suo villaggio. Mise anche del denaro in mano a Kumari. La ragazza toccò i piedi di Amrita, baciò la bambina e se ne andò. Ma, qualche volta, si voltò indietro.

Analysis

Ruins - Rovine

In this short story the central theme is madness. This issue is dealt by telling the story of Champa, a woman who repeats over and over her final words of warning to her three sons before they tragically die.

The story has actually two narrators. We have a first person narrator, a young man who, on his trip to see the sun temple of Konark, meets Champa; the man at the sweetmeat shop tells the protagonist the story of the woman, hence becoming, through his direct speech, a second narrator. Therefore, direct speech plays a central role in the narrative style of this short story, and it also has the function of dealing the issue of people's reaction towards madness, by telling the story from the point of view of an internal character who reports the events as they were told him by his sister-in-law, conveying the idea of how madness is described in people's rumours. This narrative technique shows a contrast between the shopkeeper's behaviour towards madness in his talks and in facts: as he tells the story, he expresses empathy, as summed up by his final sentence: "*'This is the story of Champa. Quite a moving one, isn't it, sir?'*", while, in his utterance directly aimed at Champa, he expresses repulsion: "*'Go away or else—'*". This contrast highlights the issue of people's hypocrisy towards madness. By the means of direct speech, the author also introduces the mad woman through her apparently nonsense sentences, hence describing the direct experience of the protagonist who hears her speaking. We also have some examples of free direct thought, as in the sentence: "*Lice perhaps, I thought.*".

The register is quite formal, especially in the direct speech performed by the protagonist who, as we learn, is a well-educated young man, communicating to a person he has just met: "*I shall find me a free Sunday sometime later for another visit. I want to know. Tell me about her—of course, if it does not trouble you.*". The choice of words marks, in fact, a formal style, in expressions such as "*she would retaliate with vehemence.*" The formality of the register was maintained in Italian, moreover, with the technique of adaptation, translating "you" into "lei", when necessary: "*Mi dica della donna – se non le dispiace, ovviamente*".

Also Champa's utterances have a quite formal register and a complex syntax in the flashbacks, even though she is an illiterate person; this creates a contrast between the woman's language in the past and her language in the present, after she has gone mad. "*I know you have been eyeing the plot for a long time. You are eager to take my homestead land within the bounds of your own threshing yard, no? I will never let that happen as long as I am alive. Never try to deceive me with your cunning. You know me well—I can forget all the propriety of the master-servant relationship.*" This extract is an example of Champa's direct speech in a flashback, and it is quite different from her simple, repeating sentences in the present: "*It's all right. Don't give if you don't want to. I must hurry. I have left my little one sitting on the bank of the canal.*". Still, the extract from the flashback expresses rage and a rebellious attitude which would sound unnatural with the politeness of "lei" in Italian; therefore, in this part, formality was lowered by not using the technique of adaptation and maintaining "tu": "*Lo so che stai studiando un piano da molto tempo. Non aspetti altro che estendere fino alla mia proprietà i confini del tuo cortile, vero? Non te lo permetterò mai, finché sarò in vita. Non cercare mai più di raggirarmi con l'astuzia. Mi conosci bene, sono capace di lasciare da parte il decoro della relazione tra servo e padrone.*"

The language is sometimes poetic, with expressions such as “*My searching gaze wandered after the voice*”, or “*Days went by and summer arrived. Fruit began to ripen in the trees.*”; metaphors and similes are used to emphasise central aspects such as the woman’s strong personality before her breakdown: “*He could immediately realise that he had touched the tail of a cobra.*”, or the looks of the woman after it: “*A thick mop of rough, wiry hair dishevelled by the wind capped her head*” is an example. This very sentence was challenging to translate, since the Italian equivalent “*una scopa di capelli*” wouldn’t work properly; the metaphor was therefore translated into a simile to maintain the focus given by the figure of speech and, at the same time, to create a sentence which would make sense to the target audience: “*Capelli ispidi e scompigliati coprivano la sua testa, come una vecchia scopa fitta e arruffata.*”. The fact that metaphors play a fundamental role in this short story is underlined by the title itself, which refers to a consideration provided by the first person narrator at the end: *Instead of witnessing the grand ruins of a stone structure, I saw the ruins of real flesh and blood. All the way back I kept asking myself whether or not I should regret that.* In Italian, “*the ruins of real flesh and blood*” was translated into “*la rovina di una persona in carne e ossa.*”, using the technique of adaptation and expansion to convey the same meaning as “*real flesh and blood*”, and “*ruins*” was translated into the singular, which is more functional in Italian as related to “*persona*”, still conveying the same effect given by the repetition of the sound and the semantics of the word.

Adjectives are widely used to highlight connotation in the descriptions: in the sentence “*There was a vacant, faraway look in her sunken, mad eyes*” we have two adjectives for each noun, emphasising the distance between the woman and other people, both through the semantics of the adjectives and through the degrading to complement of “*eyes*”, a noun which designates something that would normally be an active part in communication, therefore a subject; moreover, the complement is dislocated to the right. The structure of the sentence, however, was changed in the translation into Italian: “*Nei suoi occhi folli e infossati c’era uno sguardo perso e lontano*”. The change in the structure doesn’t really affect the scale of importance of the components, but it creates a sentence which is more functional in Italian.

A difficult aspect to translate in this short story is the names of some elements of the place where it is set: the “*betel-leaves, areca-nuts*”, or the “*kia shrubs*”, which, written in italics in the source text too, gives the idea of a word which was borrowed from the Oryian text. Therefore, the technique of borrowing was used in the Italian translation, too: “*Alla sinistra del negozio c’era una fitta crescita di arbusti di kia.*”

The Ring – L'anello

This short story deals with the issue of poverty, widely discussed throughout the whole collection, and with other related themes such as lack of education, greed, and social injustice.

The writing is characterised by a refined style, with sometimes complex sentences which help emphasise the emotions felt by the main character through the tool of rhythm. Figures of speech such as oximorons and allegories are widely used. We have a third person omniscient narrator, but the author uses the tool of point of view and, more specifically, of speech and thought presentation to tell the story through the eyes of a woman who tragically loses her son to a work accident. This feature is emphasised by the means of expressions and forms which are typical of the spoken language, such as direct questions, exclamations and interjections. While translating the text into Italian, all of these traits were considered as essential because of their communicative function; therefore, they were maintained as much as possible.

The story is told in chronological order with some flashbacks, which help the reader have an even deeper vision of the protagonist's inner world. Still, we never get to know the names of the characters and this may be a way of the author to underline how the poor's rights get often trampled, annihilating their status of human beings.

The narration begins with an interesting first paragraph:

He lay flat on the hospital floor, undisturbed by the hum of visitors, the traffic of nurses and attendants, and the stench of disinfectant, even the buzzing of the flies that swarmed around his face. The other inmates of the ward, denied sleep by their assorted pains, aches and other complaints, looked at him enviously as he slumbered blissfully through the afternoon.

The first sentence has some interesting features to point out. The personal pronoun opening prompts that the story is told through the point of view of a person who knows the subject; “lay flat on the hospital floor” gives the reader much information on the setting, the hospital, whose Third World condition is immediately highlighted by the very first prepositional phrase, “on the floor”, and then emphasized by the following list of elements causing revulsion and discomfort, focusing on what the character perceives through the five senses. The second sentence underlines the point of view of the main character, who compares the pain of the other inmates to what seems to be an eviable condition, her son's, which is actually tragic: the contrast between the cruel reality and the way it is described may be bitter sarcasm, or it may be the point of view of a woman whose ignorance and pain forbids her from understanding that her son is in a state of coma. The choice of words in this part emphasizes this contrast: “slumbered” as opposed to “was in a coma”, and “blissfully”, with its religious connotation of grace received, as opposed to the disgraceful condition he is actually in.

The effect created by the personal pronoun in the first sentence, in Italian is created by its elimination. The rest of the sentence was translated maintaining the same structure in order to have the same rhythm. The choice of words in the second sentence was crucial in conveying the same idea as the source text:

Stava sdraiato sul pavimento dell'ospedale, indisturbato dal brusio delle persone in visita, dal via vai di infermieri e assistenti, dalla puzza di disinfettante e neppure dal ronzio delle mosche che sciamavano intorno al suo viso. Gli altri ricoverati del reparto, ai quali il sonno era negato da dolori, mali e malesseri di ogni genere, lo guardavano con invidia mentre passava il pomeriggio sonnecchiando beatamente.

The second paragraph goes on emphasizing the awful condition of the hospital and, still, how poverty makes the characters' condition even worse.

So what if he had been denied a bed and dumped on the floor? Was it such a calamity? Even that seemed a luxury to the old woman.

Che importanza avrebbe avuto se gli fosse stato negato un letto e fosse stato cacciato per terra? Sarebbe davvero stata una disgrazia? All'anziana sembrava un lusso persino quell'ipotesi.

This issue is underlined by the contrast between “dumped on the floor” and “luxury”, which was translated in Italian choosing connotated words such as “cacciato per terra” and “lusso”; the allegory in the following sentence realises the same function of highlighting the issue of poverty:

Although they didn't get a bed, they did manage a place on the floor, large enough for him to lie down. And that without a single acquaintance, she felt as though she had successfully crossed the ocean in a flimsy dinghy, without an oar.

The final phrase of the sentence is highlighted by the separation with the comma, in order to further emphasize the disadvantage of the poor; this feature was therefore used in Italian, too:

Anche se non avevano ottenuto un letto, erano riusciti ad avere un posto per terra, grande a sufficienza perché potesse coricarsi. E averlo ottenuto senza avere conoscenze, la fece sentire come se fosse riuscita ad attraversare l'oceano su una fragile scialuppa, senza neanche un remo.

Was not the smooth concrete of the hospital infinitely cleaner than the soggy mud floor of her hut?

Another figure of speech, the oximoron “smooth concrete”, is used to highlight this issue, along with the connotation of the adjective “soggy” and of the noun “hut”. The oximoron and the semantics were therefore maintained in Italian, too:

Il levigato calcestruzzo dell'ospedale non era infinitamente più pulito del fradicio pavimento di fango della sua baracca?

This whole second paragraph is an example of what Leech and Short would define “Free Indirect Thought” with altered pronouns, backshifted verbs and no reporting clause, giving the effect that the character's voice is filtered through the narrator's viewpoint. (Simpson, P., 1993) The closing sentence:

Greed led to sin and sin to death....

Has some interesting elements to discuss. “Greed” is used to describe the desire for what is actually a basic human right: a bed in a hospital. The first sentence of the following paragraph confirms that the words told by the narrator are actually the words from the woman's thoughts:

As soon as the word entered her mind, her heart began a furious drumming against her ribs. What an inauspicious thought; she cursed herself. May she be consumed in the flames of her own foul mind; what evil there lay in a woman's tongue!

The fact that the sexist closing sentence is included in the thoughts of the woman herself, gives us much information on the ideological context she lives in.

These features previously pointed out (thought presentation, figures of speech), are widely used in the rest of the short story in order to highlight the central issue of poverty, which is described in many of its aspects such as oppression and lack of education. The least is emphasized especially by

the means of thought presentation, which makes the reader feel compassion for the woman while witnessing that she can not understand what is happening to her son and then expecting how devastating it will be for her when she finally finds out the truth. All the linguistic aspects listed have, therefore, a communicating purpose which was pursued in the translation, too. The past tense of the verb “lead” in the free indirect thought previously quoted, for example, was translated to the present tense in order to emphasise the effect of free indirect thought in Italian:

L'avidità porta al peccato, e il peccato alla morte...

The narration goes on with another comparison between the people in the ward, who are described with a raw image, “*with layer upon layer of dressings encrusting arms, legs, backs, bellies...peeling away, like insects moulting*” which contrast with the woman’s son, who, as the reader learns in this paragraph,

“was unscarred. Not a scratch on him, not one scrap of bandage. Bare he had been, except for a loincloth, when he clambered up onto the babu’s roof in the village to mend his thatch, in return for a day’s wages... before he slipped and fell into the babu’s stone-paved courtyard.”

The strong contrast between the disgusting description of the other inmates and the unscarred son builds up, along with the rhythm and the ellipsis, a climax on the last sentence, which reveals to the reader the tragic reality of the man’s condition and of the poor uneducated woman. “In return for a day’s wages” is highlighted too, bringing again the attention to the issue of poverty, which makes people risk their life for money. The climax was built in Italian using the same tools: rhythm and the ellipsis.

A confronto, suo figlio non aveva niente. Non un graffio, non un pezzo di benda. Era nudo, indossava solo un perizoma, quando, al villaggio, si era arrampicato sul tetto del babu per riparare la paglia, in cambio di una paga per la giornata... prima di scivolare e cadere sul pavimento di pietra del cortile del babu.

References to religion and superstitious statements often accompany thoughts which highlight the woman’s lack of education. We have examples in this third paragraph, in the sentence: “*By the grace of the goddess Jagulei, not even his skin had been broken by the fall. He had merely fainted from fright.*”, and in the following part: “

The babu’s daughter, who went to school in Cuttack, had made a black-tongued remark: after a fall like that, she said, people often remained unconscious for months; they could even be paralysed. It was she who suggested they go to the hospital in Cuttack, where he would be cured. The old woman was furious at first. Who had ever heard of a man remaining unconscious for months? Was he a human being or the demon Kumbhakarna?”

The expression “black-tongued” is a translation problem, because it has no equivalent in Italian and it fulfills an important communicative task, highlighting how a clever comment is perceived by an ignorant woman, especially in contrast with her own statements and, paradoxically, even with her own direct experience; moreover, it is emphasised by the column. It is important, therefore, to translate it into a form which can convey the same meaning. The expression “*uccello del malaugurio*” was used as it is quite strong, it has the same connotation related to superstition and, being an idiom, it catches the reader’s attention:

La figlia del babu, che andava a scuola a Cuttack, aveva fatto l'uccello del malaugurio: dopo una caduta del genere, disse, le persone spesso restano prive di sensi per mesi; potevano addirittura

restare paralizzate. Era stata lei a suggerire di andare all'ospedale di Cuttack, dove l'avrebbero curato. La vecchia, inizialmente, si era imbestialita. Dove si era mai sentito di un uomo privo di sensi per mesi? Era un essere umano o il demone Kumbhakarna?

The paragraph closes with the following sentences:

She had seen people being knocked unconscious from a blow on the head—not just seen it but suffered it as well. Her own husband.

In which the phrase “Her own husband” was translated into “Quel qualcuno era suo marito”, making it a full sentence, because literal translation would require to change the previous sentence in a way that it would lose its effect. Therefore, the technique of expansion was used, adding “Quel qualcuno”, which helps maintaining the emphasis on the dislocated subject. The flashback that is introduced by this sentence highlights the issue of women’s condition, especially through the expression “mere woman”, in the sentence:

The courtyard was crowded with menfolk and he could not afford to be seen listening to the counsel of a mere female.

The adjective “mere” was eliminated in the translation using the technique of reduction, since Italian expressions which would convey this meaning are not simple adjectives, but phrases such as “niente più che”, which would create a long sentence; moreover, the bare word “woman”, in this context, conveys the same meaning:

Il giardino era pieno di uomini e non poteva farsi vedere mentre dava ascolto ai consigli di una donna.

The tale of her husband’s death closes with a sentence which is free direct thought: “*The Almighty’s design may be praised*”, which has the same communicating effect as other similar sentences, such as “*Well, God grant that it be so.*”, which she says referring to the case her son could get up and walk away, while complaining for the lack of assistance at the hospital; or “*How strange God’s ways were.*”, which is a comment she adds while thinking about the hunger that affects her family. All of these expressions were translated using the technique of equivalence, since Italian offers many expressions with the same meaning.

In the extract:

her two grandchildren woke before the first crow cawed to gobble it all up. The gluttons. Her poor son had nothing. But why blame the children? That was the fate of the poor. Their pots were always empty, but never their bellies. Hunger filled them up.

Connotation of words such as “gobble it up” and “gluttons” and the oximoron “hunger filled them up” referring to the children’s bellies are used again to highlight the the central issue of poverty; therefore, connotation and the oximoron were maintained in Italian to fulfil the same function:

i nipoti si erano alzati prima del canto del gallo per trangugiarlo tutto. Quegli ingordi. Il suo povero figlio non aveva nulla. Ma perché incolpare i bambini? Era il destino dei poveri. Avevano i piatti sempre vuoti, ma le pance no. La fame le riempiva.

The stream of thoughts with its flashbacks to her son’s childhood and to her grandchildren’s hunger is interrupted when the woman feels his fingers tightening. This interruption affects the narration too, which changes from free indirect thought to narrative report of action, but it goes back to free

indirect thought soon: *“The stroking and caressing continued. Suddenly, she felt his fingers tightening, as though he was trying to clench his fist. Was consciousness returning?”*

This paragraph introduces the element of the ring, which is going to be central in the rest of the short story, as suggested by the title; it is the only material thing the man actually owns; it is used in the narration to underline the lack of self care in comparison to the attention and the cure given to it and, at the same time, it is used to symbolise the man himself: *“hard work was scraping the flesh off his bones and along with it, the silver from the ring on his working finger.”* And again: *“Being pure silver, it was naturally soft, like her son.”*, where the adjective “soft” was translated into “tenue”, which can be both referred to the silver and to the son.

As the woman is waiting, she starts thinking about concrete problems such as how to go back home and how she would have liked to buy something for her grandchildren; she starts feeling hungry and many thoughts come to her mind. Her anxiety is expressed by many complex sentences with a fast rhythm and some direct questions, which were maintained in Italian to convey the same idea of anxiety.

The woman’s anxiety and fear caused by her being lost in an unknown situation reach a climax when her son receives a cardiac massage, a concept she is not familiar with. Her emotions are expressed by the long sequence of exclamations and questions.

“He wasn’t stirring now.” is the way the son’s death is announced. It is emphasised by the contrast with the previous questions and by its opening position in the paragraph. The negative form of the verb underlines the inaction given by death and the adverb “now” underlines the change. These aspects were maintained in the translation to give the same effect:

Ora non si muoveva.

Free indirect thought is used again to emphasise the point of view of the woman, who can not understand that her son is dead:

“She quickly uncovered his face, folding the sheet back. He felt cold to her touch. The fever must be coming down. Thank God.”

The expression “Thank God” is emphasized by its position after the full stop, conveying to the reader a sense of pity towards the woman. The present tense in the sentence *“The fever must be coming down”* highlights that this very sentence is, in fact, free direct thought. Hence, these features were used in the translation, too:

Gli scopri velocemente il viso, ripiegando il lenzuolo. Sentì che era freddo. La febbre probabilmente sta scendendo. Grazie a Dio.

The following part presents some dialogues. The interaction between the woman and the nurse presents the word “Aunt” as a polite way of addressing the elders commonly used in India; this word was translated using the technique of equivalence, into the Italian word “signora”. This conversation, moreover, emphasises again the protagonist’s ignorance and, maybe, denial, by the means of reporting utterances which fail pragmatically:

‘do you have any relatives in town? Send word to them.’ ‘I have no one here,’ the old woman replied, not comprehending. ‘All strangers. What do you want me to tell them?’

The misunderstanding goes on until the nurse specifically tells the woman that her son is dead. The paragraph which follows expresses the rush of emotions which overwhelms her with a sequence of sentences that change rhythm, complexity and length, beginning with two short ones which describe the exact moment in which she finally understands and the truth devastates her:

She couldn't understand at first and only stared. Then the great rasping sobs came.

All'inizio non capì e semplicemente restò con lo sguardo fisso. Poi arrivarono i singhiozzi striduli.

“semplicemente restò con lo sguardo fisso” is the result of the technique of expansion.

Her pain is emphasised by stylistics and syntax as well as by the changing in the way the woman addresses the divinities, which, in this paragraph, are described as “evil”. The writing changes along with the woman’s emotions which become more and more intense. When her “*Grief turned to anger*”, sentences become even longer. We have a sentence with no verb and one with no main clause, just presenting a list of the people she curses. These peculiar sentences emphasise how these thoughts flow and come over her in excruciating pain, so their structures were maintained in Italian as well. The paragraphs which follow present her “*curses*” which “*flowed in broken strings*”, in free direct speech. Many direct questions, verbless sentences, dislocated subjects (“*You had to leave your seed in my womb, you cheat.*”) are all features of the spoken language which are used to express her devastation, therefore, again, the Italian translation observes them. (*Dovevi lasciare il tuo seme nel mio grembo, traditore.*) Between these paragraphs, the author presents the thought of the “*onlookers*” by the means of free indirect thought, with a sentence which maybe offers a comment from the point of view of the narrator: “*Did grief have so many faces?*”

When the woman is exhausted from expressing her pain and she seems to “*have recovered her composure a little*”, the scene of the arrangement for removing the dead body gives the opportunity to deal with the issue of oppression: the two attendants try to bribe the woman, who gives them everything she has (i.e., the two-rupee note). The disrespect the two attendants show towards the woman is emphasised by the tension built up along with their utterances, which raise the tone comparing the dead body to a “*mere lump of clay*” and which culminate with an insult, ‘*How greedy you are, old hag,*’, used by the two men to accuse the woman of wanting to steal her son, in order to conceal their actual intention of keeping the ring. This material object is once again used as a symbol to deal with the issues caused by poverty, such as the oppression of the poor, the lack of empathy towards the hungry and the moral problem. The ring is, in fact, in a highlighted position at the end of the paragraph, after an adverb and a comma: “*Finally, the ring came free.*”, which was translated into: “*Finalmente, l’anello venne via.*”, using the same structure as the source text.

The short story closes with the description of the woman’s reaction to the attendants carrying the corpse away, remaining with nothing but her son’s ring in her hands. “*The darkness swallowed up her son. Only the ring glistened in her fingers.*” Expresses how her son is a victim in a cruel world where “the darkness”, the subject of the sentence, swallows everything. The second sentence highlights, with the ring being the subject, how material goods have a central role, especially thanks to the contrast between the word “darkness”, referred to the son, and the word “glistened”, referred to the ring. “*Il buio ingoiò suo figlio. Solo l’anello luccicava tra le sue dita.*”

The final sentence “*How dark it was.*” Refers to the “*path along which they had taken her son.*”, which symbolises death, but the sentence, isolated and emphasised by its final position in the text, could be interpreted as a conclusion referred to the whole story and the issues it deals with. Literal translation was used, creating the same effect: “*Quanto era buio.*”

The Man of the Century – L'uomo del secolo

The man of the Century is a peculiar short story, both for its narrative style and its content. Translating it into Italian was, therefore, challenging for many aspects.

This story describes the society of the twentieth century through the disapproving words of the first person narrator. The man describes himself as a victim of the society he criticises; towards the end, he tells how, at a certain point, he began conforming to it. The last passage is the ultimate criticism: the narrator extends his contempt to the whole humanity as it is represented by the self-destructive and cruel human being he has become, highlighting this concept with a synecdoche which is, moreover, the title of the short story itself.

Syntax is characterised by really short and simple sentences. The reason of this may be a translator's need to create simple sentences in English, or it may be an expressive function: as the short story's central issue is dehumanisation of society, the character's minimal sentences may represent his annihilation. This feature of syntax is maintained even when the narrator wanders with sequences of sentences which convey the idea of a disorganized stream of thoughts. Therefore, this syntactic feature was maintained in Italian. The writing is also characterised by repetitions and redundancy in general, which may represent the character's inability to communicate effectively, violating Gricean Maxim of Quantity (Grice, 1975); in some cases, repetition and redundancy may be interpreted as a means to underline some concepts:

I know that I am not a superman. I am just another ordinary human being born into a modern, snobbish era. Maybe I am not as well-disposed as others who live in this age. Maybe my looks arouse revulsion and my thoughts are diabolic. This life for me is just a bizarre blend of some discordant moments.

Redundancy in "I am just another ordinary human being" has the function of highlighting the concept of normality, in order to criticise the discrimination he suffers, pointing out the reason why it is unjustified; the repetition of "maybe" highlights the reasons behind the character's isolation, creating a contrast which is emphasised by the last sentence, where the "bizarre blend of some discordant moments" may also refer to this contrast. Redundancy and repetitions were maintained in order to fulfil their function:

So di non essere un superuomo. Sono solo uno tra i tanti ordinari esseri umani nati in un'era moderna e con la puzza sotto il naso. Forse non sono ben disposto come altri che vivono in quest'epoca. Forse il mio aspetto è repellente, i miei pensieri diabolici. Per me questa vita è solo una bizzarra miscela di qualche dissonante momento.

The word "another" was translated into "tra i tanti", using the technique of compensation, hence maintaining redundancy while eliminating a word which, using the technique of literal translation, wouldn't make sense in Italian.

In the following sentence: "My natal hearth was set somewhere in some dirty, squalid shack in some nameless land unnoticed, unidentifiable on the world map.", redundancy and repetitions may be used as a means to highlight one of the main issues in the short story, which is the invisibility of the outcasts. Again, this aspect was maintained in the Italian translation:

Il mio cuore era nato da qualche parte, in una sporca e squallida baracca in una terra senza nome, inosservata, non identificabile sul planisfero.

In this sentence, the technique of transposition was used translating the adjective “natal” into the verb “era nato”.

The main themes of the short story are emphasised by other linguistic tools. The evolution of the narrator, who begins as a misfit and ends as a man conformed to the society which discriminated him, is highlighted by a contrast created by the pronoun “They” opening the short story and the repetition of the pronoun “I” as subject of all the sentences in the final paragraphs. “*They look upon me as a rebel.*” expresses all the distance between the character and other people, by highlighting “They” with its position both in relation to the sentence and to the whole short story; moreover, the passiveness of “me” is emphasised by the preposition “upon”. This concept is furtherly underlined by the following extract from the first paragraph:

I am different, they say—maybe an anti-social, barbaric and a dangerous combination of some such deploring adjectives. These adjectives, I feel, linked to my name, seem to enhance my personality.

This last sentence describes an attitude towards other people’s hatred which, related to the co-text of the first paragraph, may be interpreted as a proud distancing from the society he criticises; related to the co-text of the whole short story, the interpretation of this sentence changes, moving on to a statement of pride for being part of the cruel humanity he describes.

The issue of dehumanisation is not only expressed by the means of syntax, but also by showing a cold, emotionless point of view of the narrator:

“The man who has stamped his name on me to give me my identity was not a conspicuous character in any way.”

This sentence expresses detachment by referring to his father as “The man who...”; by focusing on the fact that he is the man who gave him his last name, the least emotional and the most formal aspect of being a father; and by the semantics of the verb “stamp”, which conveys the idea of a document, more than a person. Therefore, the Italian translation maintains these aspects, especially using the verb “timbrato”, which conveys the same idea of a document rather than a person:

L’uomo che ha timbrato il suo nome su di me per darmi la mia identità non era un personaggio di rilievo in nessun modo.

“It was enough for me that I was a human child.” The expression “human child”, with its redundancy, emphasises the detached attitude towards humanity, by giving a description which resembles a scientific definition of animal species. This expression was therefore translated using the technique of literal translation:

Per me era sufficiente il fatto che fossi un bambino umano.

“I slid out of my mother’s womb” is another example of unemotion, because of the cold way it describes the moment of his birth. Literal translation was used here too, in order to create the same effect: *“sono scivolato fuori dal grembo di mia madre”*

Register is not informal, but it’s less formal than the one in “Ruins”, which is the other short story translated by Snehaprava Das. This confrontation is being highlighted because both the short stories are characterised by similar syntactic features, which may confirm that the reason of it lays in a translator’s need to control the writing through simple and short sentences. On the other hand, the differences in register may confirm the interpretation of the expressive function of register in Ruins, and reject the hypothesis that formality is part of the translator’s style.

One of the most challenging aspects in translating this text into Italian regarded the metaphors and some expressions the narrator uses, especially in the final paragraphs, when he described his evil intentions with abstract images, which, sometimes, tend to be nonsensical:

I am eager to have all human virtues replaced by a brute instinct. I shall send a destructive stir through the little calm that has somehow managed still to exist. The virus of annihilation bred in the heaps of violence and terrorism around me has entered my blood and proliferated into millions. I will contaminate civilisation and extinguish it. I will shoot an arrow of conspiracy and distrust to pierce humanity at its very heart. I will scatter seeds of fiendish crime everywhere.

This extract shows some of those nonsensical images, and, moreover, the way verb tenses change, underlining that the sentences have no logical sequence, flowing in a speech conveying the idea that the narrator is raving. In order to maintain this kind of effect, the Italian translation maintains the same features:

Sono impaziente di rimpiazzare tutte le virtù umane con l'istinto bruto. Potrei inviare un impulso distruttivo attraverso quel poco di calma che è riuscito in qualche modo a esistere ancora. Il virus dell'annientamento si riprodusse laddove si annidava la violenza e il terrorismo attorno a me penetrò il mio sangue e si moltiplicò a milioni. Contaminerò la civiltà e la estinguerò. Scaglierò una freccia di complotto e sospetto per trafiggere il cuore dell'umanità. Spargerò semi di crimine diabolico ovunque.

The technique of literal translation was used here in order to maintain the same effect of flow of thoughts and, sometimes, of hysterical nonsense.

A Mother from Kalahandi – Una madre di Kalahandi

A Mother from Kalahandi deals with issues such as poverty and sale of children.

It tells the story of a woman, Amrita, who finds out that her apparently loving and faithful husband has bought a girl from a poor family in a village, kept her in a house in the city and had a child from her. The sensitive issues and the emotions such as *excruciating pain* described in this short story make translating a real challenge, as well as many linguistic and stylistic aspects.

The short story presents a fable tone that changes along with the developing of the events in the plot. As formerly discussed, the main character goes through a radical change in her marital life. The description of the beginning of Amrita and Swapnesh's love story stresses and even exaggerates the romance. This allows the narrative to go through a transition of the tone, which becomes less and less fairy-tale, as the suspect of Swapnesh's infidelity grows in Amrita, reaching a climax of brutality when she learns that her husband is not only unfaithful, but also a paedophile. The rawness of Swapnesh's language in his direct speech as told by Kumari, the girl he had bought, underlines the contrast between the beginning and the final part of the story. This is also the part when Kumari leaves her child to Amrita in exchange for two meals a day, remembering how this was just the way she was sold by her family. Dealing with the issues of famine and child selling, the writer used the tool of tone to emphasise the lowness human behaviour can touch.

The great number of repetitions is one of the first peculiarities that pop to the eye, and one of the most challenging aspects to translate, too. The frequent repetitions help building the fable tone and they have the function of drawing the reader's attention to some details in order to emphasise the development in the plot, but, in some cases, they would be redundant in Italian. Therefore, in translating, they were maintained where possible, but replaced where required, or eliminated using the technique of reduction. The following extract is an example:

Ten years of their life passed ever so swiftly, ever so happily. In spite of giving all this happiness, life seemed to have withheld something from them. That something, like a virus, was growing in her in such a way that it almost overshadowed everything. Real happiness eluded Amrita. However much she tried to get that something from life, it was denied to her. As if life was playing a game—a game of giving something one did not want and keeping back something that one wanted so much. At times she thought she had overcome that grief. But can any woman really overcome such a want? Because this one want creates the greatest of all great voids in a woman's life. Yes, Amrita was childless. She always wanted a little Swapnesh. But this little Swapnesh never came into her life.

The repetition of the word *life* pops to the reader's eye. In the Italian translation, this would be one of the cases where the word was eliminated with reduction, where possible. The repetition of the word *something*, on the contrary, has more than one function: it draws the attention of the reader to the object it refers to, it creates suspense and it has a musical function, too. So the Italian translation maintained this repetition, using the technique of literal translation, in order to create the effect of redundancy and solve its function. The musical quality and the function of emphasis can be attributed to the following constructions too:

- *ever so swiftly, ever so happily.*
- *the greatest of all great voids*
- *She always wanted a little Swapnesh. But this little Swapnesh never came into her life.*

These are the reasons why the repetitions were observed in the Italian translation:

Dieci anni dopo la loro vita era passata così veloce, così felice. Nonostante avesse dato loro tutta quella felicità, la vita sembrava non concedere loro qualcosa. Quel qualcosa, come un virus, cresceva in Amrita in modo tale da quasi oscurare tutto il resto. La vera felicità le sfuggiva. Per quanto lei provasse a ottenere quel qualcosa, le veniva negato. Come se la vita stesse giocando uno scherzo, lo scherzo di dare qualcosa che non si desidera e di non concedere quello che si desiderava tanto. A volte pensava di aver superato quel dolore. Ma può, una qualsiasi donna, davvero superare un bisogno simile? Perché proprio questo desiderio crea il più grande dei grandi vuoti nella vita di una donna. Sì, Amrita non aveva figli. Aveva sempre desiderato un piccolo Swapnesh. Ma questo piccolo Swapnesh non arrivava mai.

Metaphors and allegories contribute to creating the fable tone in the first part of the story, which is rich in such figures of speech. Only in the first page do we have three different examples:

- *'I knew it, you are like the petals of a rose. You smile like the moon. You are like the nectar your name implies.'*
- *The stark reality of life takes the fore, where dreams come only to evaporate; life, where flowers bloom only alongside thorns. Only for the lucky few do dreams never shatter, and thorns never sting.*
- *Like a seed, these thoughts germinated in her mind to become a magnificent tree with leaves and flowers. The nectar in those flowers sweetened their lives at every moment.*

These metaphors were translated using different techniques, in order to convey the same nuances and to fulfil their function of creating an effect of exaggerated romance, which represents the substantial unreality of the characters' love story:

- *Io lo so, tu sei come i petali di una rosa. Sorridi come la luna. Sei come il nettare evocato dal tuo nome.*

Here, literal translation was used to maintain the rhythm and the exaggeration of romance. The last sentence was adjusted with the passive form of the verb in the relative clause and with the word "evocato", maintaining a poetic nuance which would be lost with "indicato" or "implicato".

- *La cruda realtà della vita prende il sopravvento, e i sogni vengono solo per evaporare; la vita, dove i fiori sbocciano solo accompagnati da spine. Solo per i pochi fortunati i sogni non si infrangono mai, e le spine non pungono mai.*

The main clause was translated literally, while transposition was used changing the subordinate into a coordinate and translating "alongside", in the following clause, into "accompagnati", creating two structures which make more sense in Italian and, still, maintain the poetic tone.

- *Come un seme, questi pensieri germogliarono nella sua mente fino a diventare un maestoso albero con foglie e fiori. Il nettare di quei fiori addolciva le loro vite in ogni momento.*

Here, the technique of literal translation was used.

Moving forward within the text, one can notice how these figures of speech thin out, until they become rare in the last part of the short story. We have just one in the part where Amrita recognises her husband's purse in Kumari's hands:

Kumari handed over the money purse to her. She recognised it immediately and closed her eyes with a feeling of excruciating pain. But in her closed eyes also she was seeing Swapnesh. Her mind was swimming in a pool of anguish; her body was burning with the fire of misery.

These metaphors are completely different from the formers – symbols of life and love such as flowers and trees are here replaced by symbols of death and pain. This transition of tone, and language in general, emphasise the turn of events and the consequent disillusionment Amrita goes through. Therefore, the images described with these metaphors were maintained in Italian, using the technique of expansion, adding the word “avvolta”, and the technique of transposition, making “her mind” a complement:

Kumari le diede il portafoglio. Lo riconobbe immediatamente e chiuse gli occhi, avvolta da un dolore straziante. Ma nei suoi occhi chiusi vedeva Swapnesh. Con la mente nuotava in un mare d'angoscia; il suo corpo bruciava nel fuoco della tristezza.

This analysis on the rhetorical level help understand how the writer wanted to highlight this transition in language to go along with the developing of events, which is a peculiarity to observe while translating.

In this short story direct speech is a useful mean to describe how poverty and famine cause a lack of culture, affecting the character's language. When Kumari talks to Amrita, the reader can notice a difference between the two of them: Amrita is a wealthy woman who reads books, while Kumari is a poor girl whose family had to sell her in order not to starve to death; her language is simple and it underlines her naivety, caused by her young age too:

The way he was sitting, the way he was talking, I began to understand that there was this other hunger for flesh.

The contrast between her innocence and the brutality of the concept expressed emphasises her condition on a cultural level and the horror she had to face, at such a young age, moreover. Literal translation was used, maintaining the same effect in Italian:

Il modo in cui sedeva, il modo in cui parlava, mi fece capire che esisteva anche quest'altra fame di carne.

A Mother from Kalahandi offers the portrait of some of India's most sensitive issues and, by the means of style, tone, and semantics it takes the reader through a journey inside the characters' experience and emotions related to such painful aspects. The writer Gayatri Sharaf was able to use the tools of language to make such brutality outstand, as we can witness through Sumanyu Satpathy's translation into English.

Conclusions

The four short stories in question deal with a variety of themes, regarding the main issues which afflict Orissa's population in the second half of the twentieth century: women's condition, mental illness, poverty, illiteracy, isolation, all seen from different viewpoints: a well educated young man in *Ruins*, a poor and illiterate woman in *The Ring*, a Misfit in *The Man of the Century* and a wealthy but suffering woman in *A Mother from Kalahandi*. In addition, many cultural elements such as arranged marriages, Indian gods, black dots used to cast out evil spirits and ayurvedic medicine are mentioned.

Language presents some similarities in some short stories: we already discussed the syntactic structure of *Ruins* which is common to *The Man of the Century*, and how the fact that both short stories were translated by Snehaprava Das may suggest that the reason behind it could be the translator's style; still, the impossibility to read and understand the original text makes this interpretation highly hypothetical. Some of the short stories have some features of the Indian diatopic variation of English, such as the use of "Babu" in *The Ring* and in *Ruins* and, in the latter, the use of "Aunt" as a polite way of addressing elder people; *Ruins* also borrows some words such as *kia*, written in italics to underline this peculiarity; *The Man Of the Century* and *A Mother From Kalahandi* show some structures which may sound a little odd, suggesting a possible calque from the original text but, again, these remarks are conjectures; anyway, the language in the four short stories show many differences from many points of view.

The variety of narrative styles and techniques makes each short story unique and interesting to analyse and translate: the two narrators and the importance of direct speech in *Ruins*, the use of Point of View in *The Ring*, the elements which resemble the stream of consciousness in *The Man of the Century* and the use of tone as an expressive tool in *A Mother from Kalahandi* show, in addition, a refined work done by the translators who made these short stories available in English. All of these features made translating these stories into Italian a challenge; many different translating techniques were involved, all the while trying to respect the communicative function that each peculiar structure and expression aim to fulfil.

None of the stories give evidence or references which would help understand the time period of the plot; some elements such as a car, a tv, a truck and a bus in *Ruins*, *The Ring* and *A Mother from Kalahandi* suggest that the setting may be recent, at least contemporary to the writers.

Because of all of the features discussed above, the source text would moreover make an effective tool for educational purposes in school, since it offers food for thought on many levels—linguistic, historical, social, political and cultural, for instance. Indian history, literature and culture are rarely mentioned in English literature schoolbooks in Italy, letting students ignore a major topic related to English colonialism and culture, and including a text like *One Step Towards the Sun* in school programs would offer many activities to overcome this lack.

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