

House of Cards

Translation of

“Tasher Ghar” by Tarashankar Bandopadhyay

Translated by

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Abstract

The story delves deep into the psyche of women and subtly analyzes them from the inside, as the protagonist of the story, Shaila, is caught up in a situation peculiar to Indian women, between her paternal home and her father-in-law’s house. She exaggerates her father’s financial condition while staying in her father-in-law’s house and vice versa, that leads her into some serious trouble. The present translation of “Tasher Ghar” by Tarashankar Bandopadhyay, one of the most notable short story writers of Bengali literature, recipient of “Padmasree”, “Padmabhushan” and “Gyanapith Award”, strives to faithfully render the intricacies of the source language text by following a judicious blending of word for word translation and sense for sense translation methods. Utmost care has been taken to render the source text as objectively as possible and equivalent words are searched — literal where possible and interpreting where necessary.

Keywords:

House of Cards, Tasher Ghar, Tarashankar Bandopadhyay, Indian women

House of cards

Amar had bought a tea-set out of fancy. Beautiful coloured items like six saucers, cup, tea pot etc., even the cost was not at all less— four rupees. Four rupees is enough for a middleclass householder.

The command of Amar's mother was, put the set away carefully bouma¹, bring it out when relatives or gentlemen come.

Kolkata-emigrated Harendrababu's family have returned, today the female members of their family would come to visit Amar's house; for this preparation a grand arrangement was going on.

Mother commanded, bring out that tea set today Gauri.

Gauri is the daughter of the house— Amar's unmarried sister. Mother gave the bunch of keys to Gauri. Gauri opening the utensil-room brought the set out along with

the German silver tray and told, why is there five cups ma², what happened to another one? Now, see, I'm just taking it out, don't blame me, huh.

Mother being irritated cried, look carefully, it must be somewhere in the room. It won't fly away in its wings.

Gauri, putting the set down, again searched the room minutely and came back saying, whether it developed wings or somebody had eaten it I don't know huh, but it's not here in the room.

Mother entering the room noisily retorted, what's your fault ma, it's my luck. You work keeping your eyes above your forehead, can't see things below.

Gauri's eyes might have remained above her forehead, however, in this matter she proved to be innocent. The cup could not be found.

Mother shouted, bouma, bouma!

Bouma – Amar’s wife Shaila – was busy with arranging seats for the guests after cleaning and washing the room upstairs, she came downstairs to her mother-in-law and asked, did you call me?

For mother-in-law utensils were as dear as her life itself, she was happy with the utensil-room key giving the chest key to her sons. She was clamorously flaring up like brinjal cast in hot oil, she exploded, yes princess, otherwise did I call bauries³ or the doms⁴ by bouma?

Shaila stood silent; she was not accustomed to answering.

Mother-in-law enquired, why is one cup missing, what happened?

Remaining silent for sometime bodhu⁵ replied, I’ve broken it ma.

Mother-in-law staring at her face for sometime said, you’ve done a good job ma, what else shall I say!

Frankly speaking, there is no other option but to forgive when the wrong doer confesses her misdemeanor candidly. Mother-in-law shutting the door nosily screamed, I’ll throw out the remaining five also breaking into pieces.

Her rage fell upon the tea-set.

Shaila used to endure everything quietly, she silently stood there. Mother-in-law exclaimed, you’ve mentioned you’ve broken; fine, now why are you standing here? Go, finish your work upstairs and come, breakfast has to be prepared.

Shaila went upstairs and returned with a smiling face after sometime and stood beside mother-in-law in the kitchen.

Mother-in-law’s anger had come down; she instructed, prepare the dishes as par your native place.

Shaila, taking the materials for preparation asked, shall I stuff fish inside all the items, ma?

—What, will you stuff fish? Oh, sure, no widow is going to come.

Shaila while stuffing fish inside the cover of flour continued, you know ma, if you had mixed some asafœtida it would have been fantastic. My father doesn't like any dish without it. He never permits ordinary asafœtida to enter our house; natives of Afghanistan provide it when they visit us.

Mother-in-law replied, west is a nice place dear, can it be compared to our village, can you get those here?

Shaila responded saying, that kind of asafœtida can't be found in west either, ma. Afgans bring those for them, only because they respect my father, and sometimes borrow money – that is how we get it. And not only asafœtida, when they come, all of them give small baskets each full of grape,

pomegranate, pear, almond, asafœtida. What a plenty it becomes! Lots of unripe things get rotten.

Her sister-in-law, Gauri sneered in a soft voice from the balcony, now it has started again.

That means the story of her baperbari⁶ has started. It's true, this is Shaila's fault, this modest, gentle, sweet, beautiful bou⁷ cannot but compare with her father's house all the time.

An uproar was rising in the neighbouring house, a heated argument had started between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law.

Shaila's mother-in-law replied, let it be ma, I've got a good bou, doesn't know to answer back; if she commits mistake, I feel pity seeing her face.

Shaila exclaimed, why doesn't her son chastise his wife? You know ma, if it were my elder brother it won't happen. He would have sent his wife to her father's

home. Once my boudi⁸ answered something to my mother, my brother didn't talk to her for three months. At last, my mother persuaded him to talk. However, my brother has some mania – he'd wear khadi⁹ up to knee, shirt remaining half — very short. No tobacco, no bidi¹⁰, no cigarette— he is such a maniac.

Mother-in-law probably became irritated, urged, come on, come on, move your hands fast; see, there shouldn't be any fish-bone.

Shaila replied, these fishes are so small— my hands aren't moving because of picking the fish-bones out; but it's over now.

Putting a handful of singaras¹¹ in the frying-pan, she continued, my mother never allows small fishes to enter our house. She will refuse instantly if it were less than 2 seers¹². Among the small fishes Moya¹³ and among the Cath¹⁴ fishes magur¹⁵.

Mother-in-law stopped her saying, come on, come on, dress your hair after finishing it.

When she finished decorating her hair, Shaila was changing her clothes.

Her sister-in-law Gauri exclaimed looking at her admiringly, uff, your complexion is so fair boudi! Whatever you put on you'd look beautiful, but look at us, just like tanned—

Shaila responded saying, it is not to be given dear; otherwise I'd have given you also. What complexion have you seen in me? Had you seen my father, mother, brother and other sisters, then you'd have seen what is called complexion; just like a rose.

Gauri became astonished, replied, what are you saying boudi, even fairer than you?

—Yes dear, I'm dark among the house.

Mother-in-law coming back hurriedly whispered, how long bouma, they've all come.

Shaila, quickly putting on the cloth over her head, said, I'm done ma.

Shaila appeared before the rich Kolkata-emigrated ladies putting their precious dazzling embellished grace into shame— like the moon in the firmament.

The emigrated ladies, being enamoured, were looking at her, Shaila prostrated and touched their feet in obeisance with a smile in her face.

The mistress of a neighbouring house proclaimed, you've got a bou just like the moon, can she read and write also?

Shaila answered in a mild voice, I never went school, as my father doesn't like school's education. I studied at home, finished matric standard, then—

Though the utterance remained unfinished but it got completion by the hint.

The mistress continued, what happened to our country who knows ma, women can't get married these days if they don't study in colleges. Though my daughter-in-laws were studying in colleges, I made them give up after their marriage.

Shaila replied, I've also read some college courses. But my sisters are studying seriously; my brother teaches them at home, as my brother has study mania, you know— he buys books worth five to seven hundred a year— Bengali, English!

He orders English books from England. If you ask him to do work ma, to look after my father's business, he would say, vast ocean of knowledge lying in front of me ma, I don't have leisure to turn my eyes away.

—Where is your baperbari?

—Allahabad. You must have gone to Allahabad, I suppose, we've lived there for three generations. My father is a contractor there.

—How much he gets?

—I don't know exactly. But mejobhai¹⁶ often says, it cannot go on like that ma, tell father. He lends the brick houses and stays in huts with a pantile shed, inspects work riding carriages drawn by pony, he won't buy motor, it won't last long. My father says, this is my ancestral home, it will remain as it is, I won't break, and I won't leave. And car, I won't buy car either, my sons would get lost in luxury. I'm earning, if they can't! You know, people used to say, Mahendrababu is, in a sense, a sanyasi¹⁷.

Shaila smiled slightly after finishing.

Emigrated mistress remarked, then your son has got married in a wealthy family didi¹⁸. Far wealthier than yours. How do the in-laws make tatta-talas¹⁹?

Strange world, strange is human mind, how one gets hurt, it's impossible to comprehend, even perhaps for the Almighty. 'Wealthier than yours'— Amar's mother got

hurt by this utterance, and told reluctantly, wealthy or not who knows didi, I don't know. But bouma keeps saying this and that, it has been two years that this milky girl has come, they can't even bother to bring her home.

Shaila burst out immediately, you know ma, my father has a peculiar method! He says, why should I take it back thinking it to be mine whatever I've given away! But, if he, whom I've given, voluntarily gives, then I'll receive them cordially, I'll treat them as mine. And tatta-talas becomes impossible from a distant place; but he always gives money whenever asked, whenever you ask, he'd give.

Mother-in-law shrieked, what did you say bouma, your father gives us money— when?

Shaila replied, I didn't tell about you ma; you just enquire— hundred, fifty, eighty— he always gives whenever he has been asked, why shouldn't he give?

Mother-in-law's face got darkened in indignation. This news will spread like bonfire in and around the world by the expatriate ladies without being confined only among her own villagers. Amar's mother was shamefully disgraced.

She cried out in exasperation, well, let Amar come, I'll ask him. But I didn't know it in the slightest extent.

The mistress of the other house explained, may be Amar haven't told you. He borrowed from his father-in-law as per his requirements.

Amar's mother wailed, why should he take? It is unjust— mean act. Chi²⁰, begging to father-in-law, chi.

Amar worked in Kolkata, he did the business of an order-supplier. Even though it was a business but its area was small, narrow was its circumference, however, he was independent; hence he used to come home twice a month. Amar's mother was

looking forward to her son's arrival with eyes reddened with anger.

She couldn't forget the humiliation before the rich Kolkata-emigrated ladies. Not only the financial hardship of the family was exposed nakedly, she also proved to be a liar. She didn't even utter a single word to Shaila these days. But Shaila was not to be blamed for that, she always looked at her mother-in-law with a smiling face for her command.

It is the law of domesticity— time takes away intensity of the fire, mind's anger also dissipates. However, it was Shaila's misfortune; no sooner had mother-in-law's rage began to melt, than it got enkindled twice by the fuel. The rumor which was discussed in the neighbouring houses and river banks, gradually got spread out.

One day, Amar's mother heard in her own ears the news of the public discussion in the Sarkar's gathering.

Ten days later Amar informed the news of his arrival owing to an opportunity of some holiday. As if the sky had fallen in Shaila's head. It was a lie, she couldn't write it to her husband in spite of having resolved so many times— she felt somewhat ashamed to implore. Her hands couldn't move, her lips trembled, tears came into her eyes; she had thrown the letter away crumbling it. Shaila sat motionless in her bedroom waiting for her husband, she would fall into his feet when Amar enters.

Suddenly, she was struck amazed by Amar's yelling. She was relieved coming out of her room silently like a thief under the veil of darkness. She was not the basis for his anger, Amar started quarreling with the porter.

—Only half mile— weight is only half mon²¹ twenty five seers, I gave you two annas²²— what more shall I give?

The man was also unyielding. He replied, why didn't you settle before then?

There you had ordered— hey, come here. Our rate is three annas— give, you have to.

—Get lost scoundrel, get lost I say— take your paisa, but get lost from my eyesight, I say.

Amar stepped into the house in fury throwing the paisa in the street.

—You see, when loss occurs, it occurs like that. Somebody stole fifty rupees, then I missed the train, again coming back home incurred four paisa loss.

Mother probably was prepared for this, she told in a calm but sharp insinuating tone, why do you bother dear? You've got a rich father-in-law, write to him, he'll send.

The sarcastic piercing words could not but hurt him even though he could not understand the meaning. Amar replied frowning, that means?

Mother said, that is precisely why I'm standing here looking forward to your arrival, son. I shall hear— do you give me

food from your own earned money or from the charitable distribution of your father-in-law? You demand money from your father-in-law, don't you, and he sends money— hundred, fifty, eighty, as per your need?

Tired and restless Amar got infuriated right away. He shouted in anger, who, which scoundrel told it?

Mother called, bouma!

Everything seemed to be spinning in front of Shaila's eyes— she could not decide what to say.

Mother-in-law asked again, why are you silent, answer me?

Bewildered Shaila replied, yes, father always gives.

Amar was frantically stroking his head against the wall. Mother quickly grasped him.

Amar declared, I won't drink if she stays in the house.

Mother insisted, I was greatly humiliated before the girls of Harendrababu's family. I also can't stay with such a bou, son.

Justice can never be done where the judge is not confined within the regulated system, it becomes hypocrisy in the name of justice. So, Shaila's destiny was sealed with heavy punishment in a light offence, — she was put to exile that night itself. Her brother-in-law, accompanying her, set out for Allahabad in the midnight train.

Her mother, being anxious in delight and astonishment seeing Shaila, exclaimed, how come Shaila, suddenly?

Shaila replied gulping, why ma can't I come? You didn't bring me, so I came.

Embracing her daughter tightly mother replied, do I not feel the urge dear, do I not feel the pain in my heart, but say what shall I do?

She told again heaving a sigh, babu's²³ income became less, probably the market has gone down. On top of that, Hoimi's marriage has come—I can't bear the expense dear.

Shaila getting a respite went on crying incessantly.

Mother asked, who came with you Shaili? Jamai²⁴?

Shaila answered with a pale face, no, my brother-in-law came.

—Where is he— why is he standing outside? —He is son of our own family. Hey, dai²⁵, look borodidi's²⁶ brother-in-law is outside, call him. Say— ma is calling.

Shaila's heart was palpitating. Amar had ordered his younger brother not to take even water in their house. He ordered him with a firm promise.

Dai informed coming back, nobody is there outside.

Astonished mother said, what? Where did he go?

Shaila explained, he has to catch the train ma, so he has left.

Mother became overwhelmed with astonishment after astonishment. —He has to catch the train— so he left— what's this?

Shaila affirmed, he has to go to Shimla ma— he's going in search of a very big job; he'll board the same train from which we've got down, so he can't stay.

Mother being assured said, did you tell him to come while returning?

Shaila heaving a sigh said, I told alright ma, but probably he can't get down as he has very urgent job. He'll go to Kolkata from Shimla taking somebody's letter, everything will be spoiled if he doesn't reach on time.

Shaila's knowledge-seeking borodada²⁷ entered at this moment. Though

wearing khadi, he had dhoti having delicate furbelow fringed with thread of gold, delicate panjabi on his body, holding a gold flake cigarette in his mouth; having some ingredients for catching fish.

Seeing Shaila he wondered, hey, Shaili when, eh?

Shaila replied smiling, just now dada²⁸. Are you fine?

—Yeah. Good, you are a changed person, pure inhabitant of Bengal— prepare these bait, let me see how lucky you are; I'll go to Deha for fishing— in a zamindar's²⁹ deck.

Shaila taking the ingredients said, once you come to our place dada, I'll see how many you can catch.

— There are lots of fishes in your place, isn't it?

—There are big fishes even in our pond— each half mon, fifteen seers, twenty

five seers. You know dada, I went there for the first time, taking a katla³⁰ fish of eighteen seers my brother-in-law told, boudi has to chop. Oh my god, I was so afraid! Now I don't have any fear— I can easily cut half mon, twenty seers fish at ease.

—I wanted to go dear but couldn't. I visit Kolkata, in spite of that I don't get time to meet Amarbabu. Had you been in Kolkata, I would have gone definitely.

Shaila said, ok, let me see, we'll also have house in Kolkata—

Dada interrupted in the half way saying, are you building houses in Kolkata?

Shaila replied, he has bought land. Now slowly it'll be built.

Mother, being delighted, asked, now-a-days jamai is getting good amount, isn't it Shaili?

Shaila casting downwards replied, he'll built corridor even in our native place.

However, after couple of months Shaila's mother realized, something unusual

must have happened, neither jamai nor beyan³¹ wrote any letter to Shaila, never asked for any news. She told her husband, see, write a letter to beyan.

Mahendrababu was very meek in nature. Whatever Shaila had exaggerated about other people, whatever she had exaggerated about her father's income, certainly she hadn't embellished her father's nature. Truly he is a good natured gentleman.

Mahendrababu, being frightened by his wife's comment, wrote a letter to beyan the very next day. He wrote — I'm your favoured person, you've highly obliged me giving Shaila a place at your feet. I hope— I pray, myself or my daughter should not get deprived of your grace. I cannot understand, what happened, what offence she had committed! But I've no doubt that she had committed some offence. She hasn't revealed anything; but in this long two months, why, no blessing had come! Mr.

Amar didn't write any letter either! Please let me know what has happened; I myself will punish Shaila presenting her at your feet.

Then, he added— though Amar haven't given any news, however, I'm elated hearing from Shaila about his improvement. I'm overjoyed hearing that he'll build house in Kolkata. I've heard the result of your mejo³² son's examination, he couldn't stand first because of a few marks. I bless him, he'll get what he deserved in his B.A.

Tears started rolling the eyes of Amar's mother reading the letter.

She was burning with rage; it had subsided in course of time without any kindling. The goddess like face of Shaila always occurred to her mind in every step. Even though she lied, the sweet melody of her voice had been sounding in her ears. Now reading beyai's³³ letter all her mortifications were instantly removed. Not only it was removed, she became very

pleased with her daughter-in-law, having read the latter part of the letter she again read those lines— house in Kolkata etc.

She wrote to Amar. She wrote to beyai— bouma is the Laxmi³⁴ of my home, can Laxmi commit any offence? However, it was my fault that I couldn't ask for any news because of the circumstances. Soon, Amar will go to bring bouma back.

Receiving the letter Shaila being delighted started writing to her husband.

Amar had come. He brought a fish of ten-twelve seers with him. Shaila quickly started to chop.

She said, probably the big fishes could not be caught. These are all medium sized.

Her sister-in-law said from the other side, again it has started. As if nobody's financial position of father-in-law's house is good!

Shaila stood downcast in front of Amar at night. Amar brought out a letter and

showing it to her said, what's this? — 'somehow bring a large fish, here I've told that we've so many fishes'. Great, we don't even have any pond, but— chi! And, 'here pearl jewellery has become a fashion, a bunch of artificial pearl garland for me'— what happened, why are you crying, Shaila, Shaila?

Shaila went on crying impatiently tucking her face in the bed and making her fineries wet. Such was the matter that it could not be expressed to Amar!

GLOSSARY

1. Bouma — daughter-in-law.
2. Ma — mother, mother-in-law; sometimes used to call somebody affectionately (especially girls).
3. Bauri — people of low caste in Hinduism, especially field workers.
4. Dom — people of low caste in Hinduism, whose job is to cremate the dead body.

5. Bodhu — wife; sometimes used to refer to daughter-in-law.
6. Baperbari — paternal house; especially used in the case of married women.
7. Bou — wife; sometimes used to refer to daughter-in-law.
8. Boudi — elder brother's wife, used in Bengali to refer to married women in general.
9. Khadi — hand-woven cotton cloth.
10. Bidi — hand made cigarette.
11. Singara — a kind of snack stuffed with some ingredients.
12. Seer — Indian measure of weight; 1/40 of Mon or 1/82 lbs..
13. Moya — a kind of fresh water fish.
14. Cath — a species of fish.
15. Magur — a kind of fresh water fish.
16. Mejobhai — middle brother.
17. Sanyasi — saint.
18. Didi — elder sister.
19. Tatta-talas — communication and exchange of customary gifts within matrimonially related families, especially from bride's side.
20. Chi — an expression of shame and disgust.
21. Mon — Indian measure of weight; 40 seers or 82 lbs.
22. Anna — one sixteenth part of a rupee.
23. Babu — master, sometimes used as husband.
24. Jamai — son-in-law.
25. Dai — mid-wife, wet nurse.
26. Borodidi — elder sister; sometimes used as mistress.
27. Borodada — elder brother.
28. Dada — elder brother.
29. Zamindar — land lord.
30. Katla — a kind of fresh water fish.
31. Beyan — mother-in-law of a son or a daughter.
32. Mejo — second born child.
33. Beyai — father-in-law of a son or a daughter.
34. Laxmi — Goddess of wealth in Hindu mythology; used to refer to wives who are lucky.

Reference:

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